MIDSUMMER NIGHT

JOHN MASEFIELD

MIDSUMMER NIGHT

BY JOHN MASEFIELD

COLLECTED POEMS AND PLAYS — CAPTAIN MARGARET — MELLONEY HOLTSPUR — THE EVERLASTING MERCY AND THE WIDOW IN THE BYE STREET — A MAINSAIL HAUL — RIGHT ROYAL — THE OLD FRONT LINE — REYNARD THE FOX, or THE GHOST HEATH RUN — KING COLE — THE FAITHFUL — THE DREAM, AND OTHER POEMS — A KING'S DAUGHTER — THE LOCKED CHEST — SALT-WATER POEMS AND BALLADS — LOST ENDEAVOR — ESTHER AND BERENICE — GALLIPOLI — GOOD FRIDAY, AND OTHER POEMS — THE DAFFODIL FIELDS — ENSLAVED AND OTHER POEMS—A SAILOR'S GARDEN — PHILIP THE KING, AND OTHER POEMS — LOLLINGDON DOWNS, AND OTHER POEMS — MULTITUDE AND SOLITUDE — THE STORY OF A ROUND-HOUSE, AND OTHER POEMS — SELECTED POEMS — THE TRAGEDY OF NAN, AND OTHER PLAYS — THE TRAGEDY OF POMPEY THE GREAT — THE WAR AND THE FUTURE — THE TAKING OF HELEN — SARD HARKER — THE TRIAL OF JESUS — TRISTAN AND ISOLT — THE MIDNIGHT FOLK — ODTAA — THE COMING OF CHRIST — MIDSUMMER NIGHT

Doig + (Coll. works)
Street (Poems)
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McNiff

MIDSUMMER NIGHT

AND

OTHER TALES IN VERSE

BY

JOHN MASEFIELD

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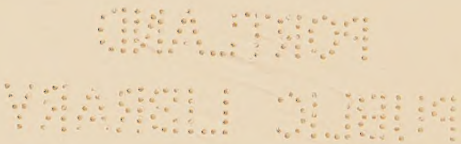

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TO MY WIFE

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MIDSUMMER NIGHT

THE BEGETTING OF ARTHUR*

UTHER, the Prince, succeeding to the post
Of Red Pendragon, or Anointed Chief
Of all the Kings in Britain, saw with grief
How jealousy and spite
King against King, let in the heathen host,
Who, coming in their hundreds, found a land
Of warring Kingdoms owning no command,
And therefore sackt, uncheckt, from Tyne to Wight.

So when he took the purple he began,
Among his friends, to build a league of Kings:
Iddoc of Kent, among the Easterlings;
The Orkney pirate, Lot;
Then, from the North, the golden hero, Ban;
And having these, he greatly longed to win
Old Merchyon, King of Cornwall rich in tin,
Whose strength would bind the leaguers like a knot.

None loved King Merchyon: Prince Uther knew
That he was aged, savage, mean and grim;
That baron Breuse, the Heartless, lived with him,
Of all bad men the worst;

* See also page 123.

That in Tintagel, nest-rock of the mew,
His daughters lived with him, the dark Ygraine,
That moon of women; then the bright Elaine,
And little Morgause, whom a witch had curst.

So, knowing that the urger of a cause
Must urge the cause in person, Uther rode
With Kol and Guy, to Merchyon's abode,
And in Tintagel tower
Pled eloquently to him without pause,
With all a young man's beauty, flusht and true;
And as he pled, Ygerna watcht, and knew
That of all knights Prince Uther was the flower.

Then Merchyon answered, "I have heard your plea.
I will not mingle in remote affairs,
I can mind mine, let others manage theirs:
What can the East, or Wales,
Or all of northern Britain, mean to me?
No Cornish men shall bleed in the employ
Of you, or others like you, Roman boy.
Your schemes are childish and your fears are tales.

Or if not so, perhaps the Romans plan
To recommence their empire, for in truth
Taxes and tribute and conscripted youth
Are playthings dear to Rome.
But you, my Roman, come to the wrong man."
So raging, wrapping close his scarlet cloak,
He left the hall: Breuse, as he followed, spoke.
"That was your answer, Uther; make for home."

Breuse and his sworders followed Merchyon out,
Uther had neither welcome nor farewell,
Comfort, nor rest, nor water from the well,
Nor food for man or horse.
He stood a moment, betwixt rage and doubt.
"Sir," said Ygerna, coming from her place,
"Father is old: forgive his want of grace.
To-morrow he'll be broken with remorse."

Then Uther for the first time saw Ygern;
And at her voice and at her wistful glance,
Love stabbed his spirit with her beauty's lance;
While she, made faint with love,
Felt the hot blush upon her temples burn.
Love to both startled mortals made it known
That each was other's to the inward bone
Through some old passion in the stars above.

As in October when the Channel mist
With silent swathes of greyness hides the sea
Until none knows where land or waters be,
And suddenly a blast
Scatters and shreds the vapours into twist
And all is glorious sunlight, wind and foam,
Through which a towering ship comes striding home,
Spray to the rail, with colours at her mast;

Or as, in mild Novembers, when the pack
Whimpers in covert and the hunters wait,
Under slow-dropping oak-leaves falling late,
Making no sound at all,

And suddenly the fox with hollow back
Breaks, with a crying leader at his brush,
And all those riders gathered for the rush
Surge for the fence, not heeding any call;

So, to those two, the greyness and delay
Of all their lives' endeavour and employ,
The hollowness which they had counted joy,
The hopes which had been dear
Until that instant, all were swept away;
They were alone upon an ocean shore
Where nothing meant nor mattered any more
Save their two souls and being without fear.

"O Princess," he began, "O dark-haired Queen,
O moon of women, we have met again,
We who are one yet have been cut atwain
To seek ourselves till now.
Whatever griefs are coming or have been,
Love in his glory grants us to make whole
Our bleeding portions of divided soul
That our last dying sundered with the plough."

And she replied, "Even as a winter bird,
Robin or chaffinch, in the iron day
Mopes, with pufft feathers, on the snowy spray,
Too pincht with cold to fly,
Too starved with bitter need to sing a word,
Till, from the farm, maid Gillian scatters crumbs,
And the bird, gladdened, knows that April comes
And carols his thanksgiving, so am I."

Then, being in the certainty of love,
That cannot doubt, however it be blind,
Those two young lovers plighted mind to mind,
And straightway told the King;
Who cried, "A pretty plot, by Heaven above.
Since I, as King, refused to be allied,
You think to win my power through a bride
Whose loving father grants her everything.

Not so, my Roman, for I see your plot.
Keep to your own princesses; she shall wed
My Breuse, who has no Latin in his head,
And you shall go out shamed. . . .
You sworders, make this loving swain less hot . . .
Set him ahorseback with his head for home.
And keep from Cornwall henceforth, man of Rome,
Or Cornish hands will swiftly have you tamed."

Then instantly, before Ygraine could plead,
Or Uther answer, he was hustled forth
(He and his Knights) and headed for the north,
With orders not to turn.
Since three alone were helpless, they agreed
To the tide's setting, but they rode in rage,
Vowing to set King Merchyon in a cage
Next Sarum Fair, to suffer and to learn.

Yet, after noon, as Uther stayed to look
West, from the moorland, at Ygerna's home,
There, on the moor, he saw a horseman come
Black against burning sky,

Galloping tow'rds him, by the way he took.
And being near, behold, it was Elaine,
Flusht, tousled, riding on a tautened rein,
Calling, "O Uther, help, or she will die . . .

Help us to-night, because my Father swears
That Breuse shall wed Ygerna before Prime . . .
Friend, can you help her in so little time? . . .
Not let her go to Breuse . . ."
"Men have plucked women out of dragons' lairs,"
King Uther said, "And I will pluck Ygraine.
O Rose in briars difficult to gain,
Lighten my mind with stratagems to use."

Then, having thought, he said, "This seems a chance.
Your porter's old: suppose I climb the rock,
Dresst like the King your father, and then knock
At midnight on the door.
He, being old and drowsy, may but glance,
Think me your father, bow, and open gates.
Then, when I bring Ygern from where she waits,
He may unfasten for me as before.

It is worth trying, for, if it succeed,
Ygern and I will be beyond the wall;
And I can see no other chance at all
Of saving her to-night . . .
And if I save her, sister, as God speed,
I swear to take her to the hermit's cell
And marry her before we cross the fell,
Making her Queen from Isis to the Wight.

You, Kol and Guy, arrange for horse-relays,
From here to where King Merchyon's country ends;
Swift horses, mind. About it: gallop, friends:
And if the luck be fair,
We'll meet again in Sarum in three days.
Sister, be ready when the moon goes west.
The hermit knows me, he is Bran the Blest,
He will assist us: have the horses there."

Who longs for time to pass? The child at school,
Sick for his home where understandings dwell;
He who counts tiles within a prison-cell;
The broken, with her wrongs;
Eagles in cages stared at by the fool;
To all these dreary longers, at the last,
Some bell of blessing tells *the hour is past:*
But none longs for it as the lover longs.

Still, at the last, to Uther, the sun dimmed;
Men drew old sails across the half-built ricks;
The quarrymen trudged home with shouldered picks;
Slow-footed cows turned home;
After the chapel-bell ceast, voices hymned;
Evening came quiet: all the world had turned
To rest and supper where the rushlights burned:
Tintagel blackened like a dragon's comb.

By moonlight Uther came to Bran the Blest
Whose shed now held the horses of Elaine,
Bold-eyed, high-mettled, leaners on the rein,
Waiting their King and Queen.

At moonset, helped by Bran, Prince Uther dresst
With crown and scarlet and a sheep's-wool beard
Like Merchyon's self; then down he went, and neared
The rock-cut stairway slimy with sea-green.

He clambered up, while far above his head,
Black on the sky, the battlements were grim;
The sentries paced above, not seeing him,
Nor hearing how he climbed.
Beneath, within the bay, the ripples spread
One after other slowly to the shore,
Where, gleaming but unbroken, they gave o'er
Like breathing from a sleeper, husht and timed.

Upon the topmost stair he stood intent
Outside the gate, to listen, while the feet
Of drowsy sentries passed upon their beat.
He heard, beyond the door,
The porter, breathing deeply where he leant
Sprawled over table near the charcoal pan.
"Come, courage," thought Uther, "play the man."
He knocked King Merchyon's knocking and gave o'er.

As he had hoped, he heard the porter rouse,
Garble some words, unhook the lantern-ring,
Kick back the bench, and mutter, "It's the King!"
Then fumble on the bar,
Pulling it weakly, gulping down his drowse.
The oaken barbolt loitered slowly back,
The latchet clicked, light yellowed at the crack,
An old man louted with the door ajar.

And as he louted low, Prince Uther passt . . .
There was Elaine, to take him to Ygern,
Telling the porter to expect return
Within few moments more.
All ways are long to lovers, but at last
He found Ygerna waiting in the dim,
Her great eyes bright, her white arms stretcht to him;
He drew her back along the corridor.

They trod the dark stone passage between rooms
Where people slept beneath the sentry's tread;
Tintagel seemed a castle of the dead.
A horse-hoof scraped the stone
Where the King's stallion waked among the grooms.
The porter, with his old eyes full of sleep,
Opened the gate to let them from the keep;
Its clang behind them thrilled them to the bone.

They crept like spies adown the cragside stair,
Into the gully's blackness between crags;
They heard the spear-butts clang upon the flags
At changing of the guard.
No challenge came; the world was unaware
How lovers fled: they reached the castle brook
Where ever-changing gleaming ever shook
An image of the zenith many-starred.

No sentry saw them; no one challenged; no,
Not when they moved across the moorland crest
Leaving the castle black against the west,
Grim guardian of the sea.

Their footsteps made a drowsy cock to crow,
A dog barked at their passing by the farm,
But no one stirred nor answered the alarm:
They reached the hermit's chapel: they were free.

There in the little chapel of the well,
By taper-light, the hermit made them one.
"Now cross the moor," he said, "before the sun.
God be your guard and speed."
They turned the chafing horses to the fell,
That King and bride upon their marriage day;
The nightingale still sang upon the spray,
The glow-worm's lamp still burned among the weed.

All day and night they hurried from pursuit;
Next morning found them out of Merchyon's land
Beside a brook with wood on either hand,
Deep in a dell of green:
Cool water wrinkled at the flag-flower-root,
The meadowsweet her heavy fragrance shed:
"Here," the pair thought, "shall be our marriage bed,
Here, in this orchard of the fairy queen."

So there they halted in the summer flowers,
The speedwell blue, the stitchwort starry bright,
The dog-rose not yet opened, pink or white,
But sweet as very love.
Blackbirds and thrushes sang the lovers' hours,
And when the young moon brightened golden-pale
In the blue heaven, lo, a nightingale
Singing her heart out on the spray above.

There the two loved. Alas! ere morning came,
There Breuse and Merchyon, finding them asleep,
Stabbed Uther dead, and took Ygern to weep
In grim Tintagel tower.
There she sat weeping at the weaving-frame,
Waiting to bear her son before she died;
And as she wept, poor woman, hollow-eyed,
She wove the story of her happy hour:—

The creeping from the castle in the dark,
The blinking porter drowsed in lantern light,
The hermit and the chapel and the rite,
The horses tried and true;
Dawn on the moorland with the singing lark,
The ride for safety ever glancing round;
Then the sweet loving place, where they were found
At dawn among the speedwell in the dew.

And sometimes Merchyon, mindful of his girl,
In mercy of her health, would have her ta'en
To rest beside the Alan with Elaine,
Guarded by Breuse's band.
There as she watcht the water-eddies whirl,
Often a dark-eyed deer with fawn at heel,
Would shyly nuzzle her to share her meal,
And robin redbreasts percht upon her hand.

THE BIRTH OF ARTHUR

WHEN the wind from East changes
Through South into West,
And the hard-frozen brooklets
Thaw out from their rest,

And come shining and leaping
Past the snowdrop's drooped head
Through the green-pushing pastures
Where moles burrow red;

Then the rooks call from elm-tops,
And lambs from the fold;
And the larks joy in heaven
For death of the cold;

And the blackbird calls clearest
Of sweet birds that sing,
And the dear becomes dearest
Because it is Spring;

And a joy of rejoicing
Springs green in the corn;
Such a joy was Ygerna's
When Arthur was born.

When the midsummer dog-rose
Was sweet in each hedge,
She took little Arthur
To Pendragon Ledge,

And at moonrise she laid him
On the Dragon's stone chair
Looking out over ocean,
Grey rock in keen air.

For the wise ones had told her
That to children so laid
Come the Powers who fill them,
And the Helpers who aid.

She laid the child sleeping
When all things were still
Save the sea-water creeping
And wind on the hill,

And the full moon came climbing
Till Time made the hour
For the foot of the Helper
And the wing of the Power.

Then at midnight Ygerna
Bent low at a cry,
For a night-laughing curlew
Laughed loud in the sky;

Such a night-laughing curlew
As never was heard:
It laughed in grey heaven,
But was not a bird.

Then again there was silence;
Then, whirling on wings,
Came the long-ago heroes,
The Queens and the Kings,

All the beast-quelling heroes
Who ruled and made tame,
All the women of glory,
All the spirits of flame

Who had wrought in this island
To make her more fair,
And exist now forever
In the beauty they bare.

There they gazed upon Arthur
With their light-giving eyes,
All the lovely true-hearted,
True-sighted and wise.

And a King said: "Our harvest . . .
This corn coming green."
And a Queen said: "This captain
Will be loved by a Queen."

Then they laughed all together,
And the babe laughed in sleep,

And they said: "Little Arthur,
What we made you will keep."

Then, as seabirds at sunrise
Fly seawards from ken
To a rock of fair fishing
Untrodden by men,

Flying after their leader,
White wings on red sky,
So those heroes flew seawards
And a wonder drew nigh.

For from out of the water
A mailed man arose,
Fierce-eyed as the eagle,
But bearing a rose.

And as manes stream from racers
In wind on the down,
So flames streamed behind him
From under his crown.

He said: "Thoughts are many
But wisdom is one.
Your way being wisdom,
Will shine like the sun.

You will shine on this island
Till green corn be gold,
And the tale of your harvest
Will never be told.

All the Power within me
Shall stablish your peace;
But at evening comes darkness
When sunlight must cease."

He ceased into darkness
As meteors that die;
A night-laughing curlew
Laughed loud in the sky:

The night-laughing curlew
Cried loud in the air,
A wonder stole forward
And stood by the chair.

He was dim as an evening
Whose moon sets apace,
Green light as of glow-worms
Was pale on his face.

He said: "Little Arthur,
Our passings will meet:
My moon will be sickle
To garner thy wheat.

Thyself shall create me
To ruin thy joy,
Yet though I shall break thee,
I cannot destroy."

He ceased into darkness
As sea-mist that dies;

The night-laughing curlew
Made mirth in the skies.

Then a wonder most lovely
Swept in from the west,
As a sea-bird white-pinioned
Who glides to her rest;

Her face had the quiet
Of night at an end,
Her gift was the glory
Of beauty for friend;

In the gold of her crownal
White flowers were fair;
She stood like the morning
With stars in her hair.

And as Arthur woke laughing
And stretcht out his hands,
She said: "The deep currents
Stir even the sands;

As high as the planets
And deep as the sea
Are the currents of living
That bind you to me.

To each spirit fashioned,
To each creature born,
Is a Helper from Heaven,
A Rose to the Thorn.

Myself am your Helper;
My beauty will stir
As a dream in your spirit,
As the prick of a spur:

Though others' the Power
And yours be the seed,
My beauty as Helper
Will bring it to deed.

You are frail now as snowdrops
That come before Spring;
My beauty as Helper
Shall crown you the King.

And thrice in your kingship
Your manhood shall quail;
My beauty as Helper
Shall not let you fail.

And at passing, my Arthur,
I'll bring you to fold
In the violet meadows
Where nothing grows old."

She ceased into twilight;
A lark carolled sweet,
The blue-blossomed speedwell
Were bright at her feet.

As Ygrain took her baby
The seabirds flew low,

Singing: "Whither man wanders
No mortal can know.

But rise, little Arthur,
Like the green corn in pride,
And a Power shall fill you
And a Helper shall guide."

THE TAKING OF MORGAUSE

Morgause the Merry played beside the burn:
The otter said "Go home: return, return."

But no; she wandered down to the seaside;
"Go home, O little friend," the gannets cried.

But no; she strayed to Erbin heaping wrack:
"Morgause," he said, "Beware, my dear; turn back."

But no; she laughed, and ran along the beach:
Blind Erbin cried: "Come back, dear, I beseech."

She ran with naked feet in the bright foam:
The shepherd on the cliff-top called "Go home."

But no, she did not hear, or could not care.
The little vixen stopped her with "Beware. . . .

Beyond this jutting headland, drawn to land,
A pirate's Drake-Ship lies upon the sand.

There, filling water, is the pirate's crew . . .
Beware, lest, with the water, they take you."

But no, she heard the sweet-voiced pirates sing,
Filling their earthen beakers at the spring.

Above the cuckoos and the bees of June,
She heard the voices at the ancient tune:—

"My spear will feed me with another's bread,
House me, where once another laid his head,
And bride me with the girl another wed.

"Farewell, you women all, that once were dear;
Lovely is love, but warring makes more near
The man beside me with a fellow spear."

Then little Morgause longed to see and know
These dreaded pirates who were singing so.

She thought: 'One little peep among the fern,
To say I've seen them, then I will return.'

But as she went, the black-backed adder cried:
"You tread the road to trouble; turn aside."

The blunt-tailed field-mouse called with shrilly shrieks:
"Beware of iron claws and horny beaks."

Then the red robin, hopping, twittered: "Flee . . .
These men are wicked, they flung stones at me."

Now, as she crouched among the grasses' stalks,
She saw the Drake-Ship on the roller-balks.

She was red-painted with a sweeping run,
Rowlocked for twelve, with shields for everyone.

A gilded Dragon eyed the way she went,
Aft, were Thor's Hammer and a scarlet tent.

Below the cataract that leapt the rock
The gold-ringed pirates filled their water-stock.

They filled red earthen jars: their King stood near
Whetting the deadly edges of a spear.

He was a young man, smiling, with black eyes;
In all a pirate's wisdom he was wise.

He wore a scarlet cloak above a mail
Of shining silver wrought like salmon-scale.

He eyed the grass where little Morgause lay,
But did not seem to see: he looked away.

He ceased the whetting of his weapon: then
He watched the work and chatted with his men.

At flood, he bade them run the Dragon down
To sea, across the beach-wrack tumbled brown.

They ran her seaward, crying "Heave" and "Hale";
'Now,' (little Morgause thought) 'I'll see her sail.'

They hoised her red sail, singing to the pull
A song which Morgause thought most beautiful.

The red sail filled and jangled; the calm sea
Lifted and lapsed the vessel not yet free.

The wading pirates loaded her with stores,
Unlasht the steering, shipped the rowing oars.

'There,' (Morgause thought) 'they are about to go,
And I, alone, of all the castle, know . . .

I shall return and tell them: "Look at me . . .
I saw the pirates whom you did not see.

They could not see me hidden in the flowers,
But there I snuggled, watching them for hours.

I was as near as you are to the King,
I heard him tell his boatswain what to sing.

He never saw me, but he came so near,
I could have touched him with a hunting-spear.

Now, after this, I'll wander where I choose,
And when I wish to, nor shall you refuse." '

So Morgause thought, but now the Dragon's sheets
Were homed; the after rowers took their seats;

The moorings slackt; the silver-harnesst lord
Spoke to two seamen as he climbed aboard.

The two men trotted inland: a call blew
Shrill, as the captain passed among his crew.

The oars were tosst together and let fall
Into the rowlocks at the "Ready all."

'Now,' (Morgause thought) 'they go away, away,
Oar-blades green-swirling, Dragon spouting spray;

Would I could go with them, to see and know
Where all the setting suns and planets go;

To hear the Mermaids singing, and to see
The spicy Phoenix in her burning tree;

And all the golden Apples that the Snake
Guards, lest the neighing Centaurs come to take;

And that dim Valley of the silver corn
Browsed in the moonlight by the Unicorn;

O would I could . . .' And suddenly she felt
Two pirates grip her grimly as she knelt.

King Lot, the silver-scaled, said "By-and-by,
When you are wiser, you will make a spy . . .

Meanwhile, my Morgause, you shall come with me
Over the thoughtless, ship-destroying sea,

North, to my Orkney kingdom's granite tower;
In that grim garden you shall be the flower."

Thither she went: within that stony place
She grew to loveliness of form and face.

And when the seasons made her seventeen,
King Lot of Orkney took her as his Queen.

THE BEGETTING OF MODRED

When berries were scarlet
In the holly's dark green,
To the court at Caerleon
Came Morgause the Queen,

Being charged by her husband
To spy and report
On the troops under Arthur
From Caerleon court.

There she lived as a lady
From autumn to spring,
But she learned little tidings
To send to her King;

Save that soldiers were mustered
From Uskmouth to Wye,
But for all of her serpent
She could not learn why.

Then she tempted Prince Arthur,
The youth in command,
Till she saw his eyes brighten
At the touch of her hand.

There she baited her beauty
With the lures women use,
But for all of her serpent
She gathered no news.

When the daffodils flowered
In the fields of red clay
And the apple trees blossomed
And the birds sang all day,

When the swallows were building
And the cuckoo had come,
All the camps of Caerleon
Were loud with the drum.

All the troops in Caerleon
Were packing their gear;
All the whets in Caerleon
Whipped sword-edge or spear.

Queen Morgause of Orkney
Knew wars did prepare,
But for all of her serpent
She could not tell where.

In her room hung with purple
She baited her hooks
With her sweet-smelling body,
Sweet words and sweet looks.

There she tempted Prince Arthur
With beauty's delight,

So that love was between them
For one summer night.

Then when first the red cock crew
The trumpet blew shrill,
And the Caerleon legion
Came down from the hill.

And Prince Arthur rode with them
And left her in doubt,
For, for all of her serpent,
She had not found out.

But in Orkney in winter,
When waiting was done,
She bare the boy Modred
From the evil begun,
And the father, the uncle,
Had a nephew for son.

BADON HILL

Loki the Dragon killer mustered men
To harry through the western isles agen.

Five thousand raiders in a hundred ships
Sailed with him to put Britain in eclipse.

For many days they loitered to the south,
Pausing to raid at every river-mouth.

Always they met good fortune and good reive.
Kol, with his pirates, joined them in the Sleeve.

They sacked the Roman seaport: they laid bare
Down to its plinth, the marble-covered phare.

Then, growing bold, they sacked Augusta town.
Temples of many gods came crashing down.

Then Loki said, "My grand-dad, in his prime,
Burned a great city into building lime.

Upstream it was and many miles from here.
No man has harried there this many a year.

Then, as his gang dissolved, he went alone
Upstream from there, exploring the unknown,

And reached a reed-mere, whence a trackway led
Up to an ancient fort called Badon Head.

And looking thence (he said) beheld what we
Dream of perhaps but very seldom see:—

Sway-footed cows in thousands deep in grass,
Unraided reiving such as never was,

And distant downland stretching, green with keep,
White as its chalk with moving flocks of sheep.

He swore to raid there with a gang, but Fate
That loves but ruins boldness, shut the gate . . .

Ambrose the Briton maimed him with a spear
So that he lingered helpless many a year

And never came to keep his oath, nor saw
That land again, that pasture without flaw;

Nor did his son, my father: no one has;
Unraided lie those pastures of deep grass.

Now I will raid them: you and I, my spears,
Will make the greatest raid of fifty years.

We will go up the river, we will take
That land and sack it for my grand-dad's sake."

"Right," Wolf the Red Fang said; "But people tell
Those Westers' leader is a cub of hell.

Arthur, they call him: people get their fill
Coming for cattle against Arthur's will."

"Arthur to Hel," said Loki; "I shall go."
"Right," Red Fang answered; "I have warned you
though."

Upstream they rowed their Dragons: on the banks
The horsemen scouted, keeping clear their flanks.

O'er many a mudbank jammed with rotting drift
The harnessed horses gave the ships a lift.

After some days, King Loki trod the wracked
Shell of the city that his grand-dad sacked;

Then on he passed, now poling, now with oars,
Now dragged by horse-teams straining on the shores;

Now sailing, till he sailed into the green
Reed-shadowed mere his ancestor had seen.

There was the trackway, there the Badon Hill
Notched on the skyline by its rampart still.

"This is the place," said Loki. "Here we'll drive
Those sway-foot cattle to the ships alive."

He moored his ships and marched his men ashore.
He eyed those pastures of his ancestor.

No herd, no head, was in those miles of grass.
The fields were empty as the downland was.

No smoke from any house, no noise of men,
Empty the cottage as the cattle-pen.

King Loki pitched his awnings in the camp,
And bade his men new-palisade the ramp.

He said to Wolf the Red Fang, "Mount and scout
West, with the horse, to seek the cattle out."

"Right," Wolf the Red Fang said: "But Arthur calls
All cattle in, and shuts it within walls,

Soon as he hears of wolf-packs near the house.
Mounting and scouting will not bring you cows."

"Mount," Loki said. "I do not ask advice."
"Right," the Wolf answered. "Now I've warned
you twice."

Wolf Red Fang took the horse into the west,
Over green pastures better than the best.

Green though the pastures were, that summer land
Was bare of people as a desert sand.

No scout of all his raiding horsemen heard
Voice of aught living save the summer bird.

Nothing was heard by them, and nothing seen
Save summer blue above the summer green.

Nothing but summer greenness stretching on
Marked by the tracks by which the herds had gone.

"Where have they gone?" they murmured. "We have
come
Heel-scenting, sure, or we'd have met with some."

And others said, "We must be under curse. . . .
Let's back to camp before we meet with worse."

But Wolf replied, "A man who won't believe
Has got to learn: come, ride ahead and reive."

The sun declined, the misty west grew red,
But still no cattle, not a single head.

The dusk grew dim: they trembled as they rode,
For no dog barked at all, and no light showed.

At star-time they unsaddled for the night
Beside a chalk-brook, water-crowfoot-white.

They did not help again in Loki's plan,
Arthur at dawn destroyed them to a man.

Arthur pushed onward: before dawn next day
He eyed the reed-mere where the longships lay;

Those servants of the water-spooning oar
Lay flank to flank, their noses from the shore.

Their pine-plank, painted red, the hot July
Had burned to be like bonework, blister dry.

Up in the pirate's camp no watch was kept,
Drunk Kol was dicing, drunken Loki slept.

Arthur and Lancelot the son of Ban
Took burning touchwood in an iron pan;

They slid into the water among reed,
No pirate saw their coming, none gave heed.

They pushed their gear before them on a raft,
The ripples spread in little gleams that laught.

The weather Dragon-ship rose overhead
Like a house-pale, sun-blistered, painted red.

Arthur and Lancelot together smeared
Tar to the leadings whence her hawsers veered,

Then heaping twigs and pine-cones, they gave touch,
And blew, until the little flames took clutch.

No watcher heard or saw them, no one came.
The little flame became a bigger flame.

It spread along the seams and thrust its tongues
Out, till the straikings looked like ladder-rungs.

First, the wind bowed it down, then, at a gust
The flame, that had been greedy, became lust;

And like a wave that lifts against a rock
Up, into shattering shining at the shock,

So it upshattered into spangs of flame
That writhelled red, and settled, and laid claim

And tore the Dragon's planking from her bones
Roaring: the Dragon sighed with little moans.

Now swearing pirates ran to fight the flame
And Arthur's archers shot them as they came.

And Loki, rising from his drunken sweven,
Saw all his longships blazing red to heaven

And Arthur's army coming with a will
Straight from the fire up the Badon Hill.

All Britons know the stories that are told
Of Arthur's battle for that pirates' hold:—

How first he tried the flank, and failed, and then
Tried at the gate and was repulsed agen;

How at the broken stakes where flints were flying,
He burst a way among the dead and dying,

And held the gap, the while his meyny all
Shovelled and picked, to totter down the wall;

How Loki charged and beat him headlong thence
With pirates in a spear-gang matted dense;

How Lancelot and Hector and Gawaine
Routed the spears and bore him back again;

And how they beat a little breach and stood
Crouched under lifted shields to make it good;

While from the upper wall about their ears
Came flying flints and fire, darts and spears.

And how that lower ditch was filled with dead
Men taking death there like their daily bread.

How Loki, growing anxious, strove to cut
His passage out but had his pathway shut;

How thrice he tried, with three defeats, and each
Time found him fewer, with a bigger breach.

Then how, like wolves entrapped, those pirates raged,
Horseless, without a navy, foodless, caged,

With Loki sorely wounded and Kol killed.

Men also tell how Arthur's fifers thrilled

Along his front, in that late afternoon,
While all his army, in a demi-lune,

Trod to that fifing up the slope and stayed;
And how the trumpets all together brayed

Along the front, and all the army swarmed
Upward together, till the wall was stormed;

Till, on the crest, beyond the tumbled pales,
They saw all-glorious Fortune turn her scales;

And how the horse came thrusting to the wrench,
Trampling the rampart fallen in the trench;

And how the trumpets all together blew,
And Arthur's army charged and overthrew.

Under the grasses where the cattle browse,
King Loki's army keep eternal house

In Badon earth, for none escaped alive.
Thereafter Arthur's realm was free to thrive.

For many years, no pirates had the will
To band against him, after Badon Hill.

THE SAILING OF HELL RACE

WHEN Arthur came from warring, having won
A name in Britain and a peace secure,
He felt the red horizon cast her lure
To set him hunting of the setting sun,
To take a ship and sail
West, through the grassless pastures of the whale,
West, to the wilderness of nothing sure
But tests for manhood in the deeds undone.

So, in his ship, the Britain, with her crew,
He sailed at all adventure for the west:
The Severn glittered at the Britain's breast
As first her set sail wrinkled and then drew;
She dropped down with the tide,
Then, ere the changing, leaned upon her side
And smote the spindrift from the billow-crest
And strode from raddled waters into blue.

Westward she sailed, beyond familiar seas,
Beyond the landmarks and the ships of home,
To seas where never ship had broken foam,
Past all encounter with man's argosies.
The skies shone blue; the sun
Burned hotter at each marking of the run;

Out of the sea the summer islands clomb;
For many happy days they passt by these.

And there, between the surf-break and the snow
Bright on the pinnacles of crags, the land
Grew fruits of blessing ready to man's hand,
In deathless green an ever-golden glow:
And brown-skinned Indians came
Bringing them wreaths of flowers red as flame,
And plaques of gold-leaf beaten from the sand,
And begged them stay and wept to see them go.

But on they stood, until the sea-most peak
Was sunken as Polaris; till the day
No longer burned with summer but was grey
With iron snow-clouds over waters bleak.
A granite coast appeared,
Beaten by breakers; thither Arthur steered
Into the desolation of a bay
Where the scared seahawks made the echoes shriek.

All still it was, save for the seabird's cry
And for the thunder when the glacier broke
Her seaward iceberg in a spray like smoke.
All iron-grey the land was, like the sky;
But on the beach were heapt
The harvest wreckage which the sea had reapt,
Mastings of pine, fir plankings, ribs of oak;
The bones of ships, suckt bloodless, flung up dry.

There lay the helm, the yard, the figurehead;
Nay, even a ship that had been painted green;

Nay, all the wreckings that had ever been
Seemed to have stored that dockyard of the dead.
And there a cairn of stones
Rose as a tomb above the broken bones,
And on the cairn a wooden box was seen
Which held a script in heart's blood. Thus it read:

"Beyond this harbour are the granite rocks
Which are the gates of Hell, where courage dies.
Brother, I call upon you to be wise;
Return, before the Key turns in the locks.
Return, and do not dare
Death beyond death, the cities of despair.
Return, to where the lark sings in the skies
And on the Down the shepherd keeps his flocks."

Then Arthur said: "We have adventured far,
And tread upon the bones of what has failed;
The door of hell is dark until assailed,
But every night of blackness hides a star.
Come: even if we end,
Courage will bring immortals to befriend,
By whom the precipices shall be scaled
And bolted doors forever flung ajar."

Then: "On," they cried, "good captain, let us go."
Onward they sailed, till sunset, when they neared
Two forms (or were they goddesses?) upreared
On crags with wrack above and foam below,
And from their granite lips
A laughter cackled like the death of ships.

Into the race between them Arthur steered,
Dreading lest they should murder him. But no . . .

Under those awful figures and between
He passed into a race of toppling seas
That broke and back-lasht at the granite knees
And scurft with salt the figures of each queen.
Those Furies' shadows fell
Dark on that channel of the way to hell;
But Arthur's ship was built of sacred trees,
She stood, although the billows swept her clean.

On, through the turmoil of Hell Race, she swept;
The darkness, with her rooky wings of fear,
Covered the starless sunset's crimson smear;
Into the midnight of the sky there crept
Ahead, a glare, as though
The world were all afire smouldering slow.
Black towers on the glaring stood up sheer,
Lit windows in them sleepless vigil kept.

"Friends," Arthur cried, "we have adventured well:
Ahead is all the glittering and pride
Of power of the devils satisfied,
The triple city where destructions dwell.
We will adventure on
And face their death together." Then anon
Furling their sail, they made the Britain glide
Safe to a pier below the citadel.

Hell Race, the channel of the ocean, thrust
Tongue-like throughout the city: her two banks

Glittered and glowed with lamplight, ranks on ranks,
Higher than March's madness flings the dust;
Within some topmost towers
Flames out of cressets tosst like scarlet flowers
Where some exultant devil uttered thanks
For will indulged in executed lust.

Where Arthur lay, the city's dreadful joy
Came to him from the streets, for devils dirled
Pan upon iron pan, for glee; or hurled
Crockery crash, to shatter and destroy;
With shrieking horns they sped;
Explosions burst; the fire rusht up red;
Devils of discord, dancing, shriekt and skirled,
Beating at doors their brothers to annoy.

The naked women devils lured their prey
To dens or corners where, alert, in wait,
Murder stood tiptoe by the side of Hate;
Vice stole in flusht, and, glutted, slunk out grey.
And all life went at speed,
Each for himself and let the other heed.
Life was a fury roaring like a spate,
To fall, and to keep falling, or to slay.

And, drunk with vanity, their poets barkt
The glory of great Hell, the joy, the pride,
Of being devil-born in Hell to bide,
As devil-spawn by other devils sharkt.
The shrieks of women sped:
"Bring us your brother's blood if you would wed;

Blood, that our day-old mantles may be dyed,
That Mammon may be snared and we be markt."

Within his vast and dirty temple sat
Mammon, the god and monarch of that hell,
With sharp suspicion blinking through his fell,
Toad-throated, hooft, yet pinioned like a bat.
Athwart the temple's span,
Across the walls, a fire writing ran,
Blazing the prices of the souls to sell
For all to read, the devils yelled thereat.

Multitudes trampled in the temple nave,
Fighting like wolves in quarrel for a bone;
The brazen forehead with the heart of stone,
Rat with hyena, murderer with knave;
Then from a gallery's height
The tiger devils cast into the fight
Spirits of men like dirty papers blown
That raved in dropping down as madmen rave.

And at the dropping down, the mob beneath
Leapt, like starved dogs at feeding time, to snatch
Each one a dropping from the tempter's catch;
With filthy claws they clutcht, or filthy teeth;
They tattered into rags
Those faded floatings that had once been flags;
Roaring they fought for them with kick and scratch:
They trod the quivering anguish underneath.

Yet more than Mammon, Lady Self was lord
Within that city of the lust for gold,

The jewelled thing, bespiced, bepainted, cold,
Whom Mammon purchased for his bed and board.
A varnisht shell was she,
Exquisite emptiness of vanity,
Unbodied and unminded and unsouled,
The mirror Self, whom all who saw adored.

She, and her mighty husband, and the game,
The roar, the glitter, and the zest of sin,
The prices offered by the Mammon Kin,
The gold all chinking when the moment came,
All these temptations drew
Some of the seamen of King Arthur's crew;
They stole ashore to Mammon, there to win
The worm's eternity in lasting flame.

So ere they all should leave him, and because
The Mammon people, hating foreign breeds,
Denounced him as perverter of their creeds,
One fit for burning by their holy laws,
King Arthur cut his ropes
And thrust to seaward, lèaving to their hopes
His nine deserters, there to reap their seeds.
He sailed, with bubbling water at his hawse.

Soon in Hell Race a city loomed ahead,
Unlit, unlovely, under a dark star,
Girded by forts, each scaled with many a scar,
And topped by cloud where fire glittered red.
A roaring filled the air
With thunder and destruction and despair,

As engines flung the fireballs afar
And fireballs Hell's dissolution shed.

And here the Searcher-Devils, grim with steel,
Boarded them out at sea and led them in
Within defences jaw-toothed like a gin
That kept without the port the foeman's keel.
"We are at war," they said,
"The justest war that devils ever made,
Waged as a vengeance on our neighbours' sin,
To blast them into carrion till they kneel.

Why are we fighting? That's forgotten now;
No matter why; we are, let that suffice . . .
Yes, and those cannibals shall pay the price
Before we end, nor shall we scruple how.
And you . . . remember here . . .
We end all question-askers with the spear.
Wisdom is treason not committed twice;
We make it Death with branding on the brow."

Then did those devils prison ship and crew
Under grim guard, where, natheless, they could tell
The progress of that war of nether hell:
No peace nor any joy that city knew.
The trumpet called the hours,
Trampling of troops had trodden out the flowers,
The trees were rampikes blasted by the shell;
Babes starved and women maddened, and men slew.

Bright-eyed with sharp starvation and with hate,
Twitching their bitter mouths from nerves gone mad,

With homes long since destroyed, in rags half clad,
(No craft save war being practist in the state)
They lusted, like the stoat,
To meet their teeth within a foeman's throat,
Or, like the wolf, to see the corpses shrad
With even thirsty Earth blood-satiate.

All day, all night, the shrieking and the crash
Of battle shook the town, as hate grew worse.
The elements were peopled with the fierce;
Insanity was captain of the rash.
Then cries arose: "Kill, kill! . . .
Those foreigners are workers of our ill,
Spies to a man and bringers of the curse;
Brothers, come slay and burn them to an ash."

Then some of Arthur's crew were killed; and all
Would have been killed, had not the stunt and wizen
Starved doers of the slaughtering arisen
Against their Emperor and General,
And forkt to hideous ends
Those profiters by battle and their friends.
They hurried Arthur and his crew from prison,
Then made their town a pyre of funeral.

As Arthur sailed, he saw a lightning run
Along that city's ramparts with the thirst
Of fire licking up those bricks accurst;
Then thunder blasted from it and did stun;
Then its immense strength shot
Skywards in sooty fire withering hot,

Where trembling planks and figures were immerst
In glare that slowly darkened into dun.

Then as that fiery cloud came scattering down,
Blackness oppresst that city from the sight;
The foeman's fireballs came flaming bright
Into the crater that had been a town;
The devils' laughter cackled,
As fever laughs, like fetters being shackled.
King Arthur's ship drove on into the night;
A darkness toppt the battle like a crown.

Throughout the night they sailed, till morning showed
Mudbanks and salted marshes with sparse hair
Or stubble-stalks, of herbage blasted bare.
Then, the wind failing, up the creek they rowed:
Grey wisps of vapour curled
Above that marish of the underworld;
A droning and a whining filled the air
As though small devils in the mist abode.

Then, as the sullen sun rose, they beheld
Smoke rising up from pyres of the dead;
A granite statue sat there without head;
Beyond, arose a city grey with eld,
Nay, green with dropping mould;
That which had ruined her had made her old;
Cricketless were her ovens without bread;
A wind-stirred jangle from her ruins knelled.

There the pale fevers issued from the fen
To yellow human cheeks and cloud the mind;

There tetters dwelt, that writhel skin to rind,
Or rash the forehead with a savage pen;
Palsies, that twitch the lips
Or hamstring men with anguish in the hips;
These, too, were there, and sloughings that make blind,
And all the madnesses that unmake men.

They forct those Britons to that city's queen,
A winged and browless fierceness on the throne,
Vert-adamantine in her hall of bone,
Fang'd, sting'd and mail'd in metal gleaming green:
No thought was in her eyes;
In where her victims' blood ran she was wise;
Her death-horns filled the palace with their drone,
Her dart of death out-quivered and was keen.

"Arthur," she said, "you stand in Nether Hell
Upon the sediments of greed and pride,
The rotted dust of nations that have died,
Amidst the foulness where destructions dwell.
Here the strong hand grows faint;
Here poison saps the manhood of the saint;
Here beauty sickens, joy goes hollow-eyed;
What else of glory is, my minions quell.

I slay the nations, one by one, that stood
Fierce-eyed in rapine and the fire of sacks,
Bright-eyed in ringing breaches in attacks,
Glad-eyed in glory from the beauty good.
I am the final Death,
Unseen and unsuspected as the breath,

Yet fatal as the crashing of the axe.
I am the ender of all hardihood.

You, too, with your adventurers, are sealed
As mine already: see, your cheeks are pale,
Your scarlet currents in their courses fail;
However lusty, they will swiftly yield,
And you will dwindle down
To beg among the ruins of the town."
Then Arthur felt a weariness assail,
Nor could he struggle, nor oppose a shield.

And there with yellowing skins his seamen drooped,
Their arms too sick to pull upon the oar,
Forgetting how the sail rose to the roar
Of singing, as the gleaming clipper swooped.
"We've done enough," they cried,
"Leave us alone." There seven of them died:
Their burials were the vulture and the boar,
Whose scavengings the shallow graveyards scooped.

There Arthur saw the chickweed green the deck,
The halliard rot, the anchor-cable rust;
Gone was all order, gone were hope and lust,
The sick mind stared contented with the wreck.
Then in a midnight drear,
As Arthur tossed, a brightness hurried near,
A sudden glory on his senses thrust,
A terror prickt the hair upon his neck.

There, in her blue robe, the immortal queen
His Helper, stood, the calm one, the benign,

Crowned with forget-me-not and columbine,
And speedwells blue and never-withering green;
No darkness nor disgrace
Could bide the beauty of that steadfast face.
"Arthur," she said, "from birth devoted mine,
Now flung as straw for devils' hands to glean,

Take power from my touch; arise, arise,
Cast loose these prison-tacklings and begone
Forth from these dens where sunlight never shone,
Nor flower throve, nor spirit saw the skies.
My power gives you strength."
Then spirit kindled Arthur, and at length
It stirred his seamen from the malison
Of that third monarchy of the unwise.

So, with that Helper at the helm, they stood
Clear from that city's mudbanks, and away,
To seas where flying fishes skimmed the spray
And every blowing air gave hardihood.
Homeward the Britain cleft,
Of all her company but seven left.
Soon the blue water dimmed into the grey
And bright Polaris rose as they pursued.

Till, as they sailed, they saw the seaweed float
And felt a changing tide. When darkness came
They watched for sight of land or beacon-flame,
Or any friendly sail or fisher's boat.
The steering lantern purred;
Then through the haze before the dawn they heard

Triumphantly a red cock call his dame,
Making a stallion challenge with full throat.

Then as the haze blew seaward, they beheld
The hills of home, the country green with corn,
Blossom upon the blackness of the thorn,
The hedgerows with the pretty primrose stelled;
They heard the blackbird sing,
They heard the chiff-chaff and the birds of spring,
The early cuckoo wandering forlorn
In woods whose millioned green was still unshelled.

Till noon they coasted, reach by lovely reach,
Beyond King Dyved's, past King Ryence' lands,
Past mountains casting shadows on the sands
And river water shining over beach.
Then lo, a brazen-poled
Bright chariot driving, all aflame with gold,
A chariot driven by princesses' hands:—
A princess drove to welcome them with speech.

Two stallions dragged that chariot like a spate,
White stallions lovely as the leaping pard,
Pickt stallions of King Ocvran's bodyguard,
Urged by a green-clad woman, who, elate,
With streaming red-gold hair
And eyes like stars illumined and aware,
Croucht watchful, to the grippt reins straining hard,
As one who lifts a winner up the Straight.

There did the giant Ocvran leave the car
And welcome Arthur to the shining shore;

There Arthur furled the sail and tosst the oar
And dragged the ship where billows could not mar.
The red-gold lady dear
Was Ocvran's daughter, princess Gwenivere,
Whom Arthur worshippt then and evermore,
As in the night the traveller the star.

ARTHUR AND HIS RING

Beauty's Delight, the Princess Gwenivere,
The day she promist marriage to the King
Drew from her hand the gem she held most dear,
Kisst it, to Arthur gave,
Saying, "O love, I plight me with this ring,
This sapphire, my most precious marvellous thing."
Her hair was in it, red as corn in ear.
"This," Arthur said, "I'll carry to my grave."

And being filled with joy, he went to thank
The goddess Venus who had blest his love.
Her image stood before a marble tank
In which, in glittering falls,
A fountain sprinkled water-rings that clove
The shadows of the temple myrtle-grove;
There her bright-breasted pigeons preened and drank,
Sidling and ruckling ever with douce calls.

In marble was the goddess, fashioned well,
Yearning a little forward as she stared;
Men thought her holy bosom rose and fell;
Her robe drooped to her hip,
Fallen in folds, while all above was bared . . .
The myrtie shadows and the water fared

Into the pool before her, there to dwell
With the statue's shadow for companionship.

And Arthur, passing, saw his shadow pass
Along that water on the imaged sky
Wherein the evening planet's glitter was.
He reacht the shape of stone,
Love's very Queen who gives the victory;
He saw her sweet, proud face, her steadfast eye,
Her crown that gleamed, like glow-worms among grass,
Her left hand stretcht, her right hand at her zone.

"O lovely Queen," he cried, "to whom all hearts
That ever suffered Love's intensest ache,
Turn with most passionate crying from all parts,
Take now my thanks, most sweet;
All my heart's deepest thankfulnesses take,
Because, to-day, thy Loveliness didst make
Me, thy poor servant, healed from many smarts
By granted love;" he bent and kisst her feet.

And as he kisst, he felt the marble thrill
As though alive; he felt her garment stir;
Her awful beauty made his heart stand still;
His spirit understood
The cryings of the birds attending her;
Light beat upon him, and the smell of myrrh;
Ecstasy rapt him to a greater will;
A peace that burnt like fire, a pain most good.

"O goddess, risen from the sea," he cried,
"Grant that this ring which my beloved gave

May touch your finger and be sanctified;
And make my love endure
Like to the mountain, not the breaking wave;
Make it my star to shine beyond the grave.
O rose, whom men adore in every bride,
Grant me this boon, most beautiful, most pure.

Behold the ring." At this, he tendered it
To Venus' self, and with his gentlest touch
Upon her outstretcht finger made it fit . . .
But to his utmost awe,
The finger bent to take the ring in clutch;
Then, instantly, his ecstasy was such
That the green leaf was speaking to his wit
And the gold glow-worm telling him his law.

He felt the goddess' hand caress his head;
He heard the music that the planets sing;
Strange flowers fell upon him, scarlet-red,
And glow-worms gleaming green . . .
Yet in the midmost of his joy, the King
Still strove amidst it all to take the ring,
But, lo, it clippt the hand that never bled,
Merged to the finger of the marble Queen.

And as his fingers pluckt, the glory went;
The twilight's wind was in the myrtle grove,
Rattling the leaves and killing all the scent;
The goddess was but stone,
A marble thing to which his jewel clove;
He wrested at it, but it would not move,

It could not move, the finger being bent,
The goddess meant to keep it for her own.

Even with unguents, even when he smeared
Finger and ring with oil, the gem remained
Fast on the stone; until King Arthur feared
That it was lost indeed.
"And yet," he murmured, "if the stone were planed,
By some good craftsman when to-night has waned,
Then, without any doubt it could be cleared."
He went to bed, praying that dawn might speed.

But being abed, the midnight glowed with fire.
There, standing radiant in her crescent moon,
Was Venus' self, the Granter of Desire,
The Hope forever green.
Her quire of lovebirds carolled all in tune,
Her laughing eyes were glowing like the noon,
Joy was her gift and beauty her attire.
"Arthur," she said, "will you not take your Queen?

For I am yours, you wedded me this night;
Take me, beloved: I was never won
Before by mortal man beneath the light,
But I am won by you."
Then Arthur cried, "O creature of the sun,
Have pity on me, O immortal one,
Give back the jewel that my lover plight,
It is Queen Gwenivere's and I am true."

"Behold it, set upon my hand," she said;
"You placed it there with many words of love;

Though I am deathless, do not be afraid,
I am your wedded wife."
"O lady, no," he cried. "By heaven above,
By you, the Blesser and by judging Jove,
My love is Gwenivere, the royal maid,
I neither wooed nor wed you, on my life."

Her crescent moon dimmed down, her eyes seemed stone,
Her scarlet lovebirds dimmed and ceast to sing;
He heard the bloodhounds in the courtyard moan.
"So, Arthur, you deny
Me, the immortal, you an earthly King.
God has your words recorded, I your ring,"
The goddess said: "But she whom you disown
Will come again." She dimmed into the sky.

All day he urged his craftsmen, one by one,
To break away the ring; but all from fear
Of goddess or of priest, refused, and none
Would lift a tool or hand.
Then as he sorrowed in the midnight drear,
His bloodhounds whimpered like a stricken steer,
Venus again came shining like the sun,
With eyes not glad, but gleaming like a brand.

"Arthur," she said: "Behold your Queen again . . .
I come out of the brightness of the sky
To seek my husband; must it be in vain?"
Then he, in sore distress,
Said: "Queen, return the jewel. I deny
I ever gave, or thought of giving. I . . .

Goddess, take pity on a mortal's pain."
"So," she said, "twice you spurn my happiness.

Be wise in time, my Arthur, and beware
A third denial." Then, with dimming light,
She faded from the room and left him there
Shaken at loss and threat.
Unhappy dreams tormented him all night,
Hell-hounds, with yellow eyes and fang-teeth white,
Trotted about his bed with the night-mare.
He rose like one well taken in a net.

And looking at the quay below his tower,
He saw a stranger landing from a ship;
A dark, fierce man, with bright eyes full of power
Blazing beneath a hood . . .
One swift and telling as a cutting whip,
Keen, with a King's decision on his lip.
He smiled on Arthur; Arthur toiled an hour,
Then sought the garden where the statue stood.

And lo, a curse had fallen: fungus grew
Over the goddess in a lace of green;
No sparrows chirruped nor did pigeons coo,
And mat-weed chokt the tank.
The smell of dying made the place unclean,
All withered were the myrtles of the Queen.
"This cannot be the garden that I knew,"
King Arthur thought, and yet his spirit sank.

"Alas," he muttered, "I have brought a curse
Through scorning of the goddess in the night."

Yet in Apollo's house the wreck was worse;
Jove's house was in decay,
The altars bloodless without gift or rite:
No sweet blue incense-smoke, no votive light,
The golden serpents broken from the thyrse,
And no one there to sacrifice or pray.

No pine torch streamed to Mars in tongues of flame.
The sanctuary of the Sun was shut,
And in the Moon's house kittens were at game:
To Mercury no oil
Poured, and to Saturn was no offering put,
Vine-prunings, milk, or cornshoots newly-cut;
No woman called aloud on Juno's name,
Nor brought her wool, or balm, or household spoil.

And no man was at work at field or craft,
Nor loitering in the market or the lanes,
No hawkers cried, no children screamed or laught,
No women tended stall:
The world seemed weary of its fight for gains,
Its daily battle with its daily pains,
Its daily acquiescence in the daft;
A strange awakening had come to all.

But turning tow'rds a lifted voice, he heard,
He found them in the circus at the gates,
Intently listening to a teacher's word.
That same fierce foreign man,
Whom he had seen on quayside midst the freights,
Was speaking to them about life and fates.

His spirit quelled them like the eagle-bird,
The hearers trembled as his message ran.

And when he ceast, those tremblers rose as one,
Eyeing each other for a man to lead;
Then, at a word, they all began to run
Towards the city gate,
Crying, "Destroy the idols, the whole breed . . .
Destroy these statues of the devil's seed!"
Then household idols from their niches spun
Crashing: the stranger bade King Arthur wait.

"Arthur," he said, "I see you have a grief
Tormenting to your spirit: lay it bare."
Then, having heard, he said: "I bring relief;
Their strength begins to fail.
They are but erring thoughts and empty air,
Though some of them are strong and others fair.
My Master is the Master of their chief;
Trust to my Master, for his words avail.

But, hark. To-night, at midnight, you must go
Out of the city to that open space
Where the three highways all together flow
Before the bridge-gate fort.
You know the spot: it is an evil place:
Blood-sodden spirits haunt there without grace.
Natheless, go boldly, for ere cocks shall crow,
Their King will travel thither with his court.

Go to that Sovereign and demand your ring
Before he pass the gateway with his crew;

Many and deadly evils do they bring . . .
My Master be your guide.
Ask for that stolen sapphire as your due
And do not blench nor quaver: if you do,
Then truly it will be an evil thing;
But to the valiant nothing is denied."

At midnight Arthur crept outside the gate
Over the causeway to the river bank,
There where the bridge-head tower rose up great
Above three meeting roads.
A fire-basket swung there from a crank,
Lighting the river-ripples rank on rank;
Nothing was there but darkness full of fate
And spirits without pardon or abodes.

And Arthur, standing at the meeting ways,
Lit by the fire swinging from the tower,
Heard voices crying in a meteor-blaze
That streamed across the air.
One voice was calling: "They have had their hour!"
Then one: "All changes, even Beauty and Power."
Then one: "Eternity has many days . . .
The things that will be are the things that were."

Then, from the city, horses' clattering feet,
Trotting upon the causeway, swiftly neared . . .
There came an old King, in a winding-sheet,
Whose gemless crown was lead.

Long-boned he was, sunk-eyed, with scanty beard,
Old beyond human telling, bowed and sered,
Tapping the ass he rode with ancient wheat
That, like a sceptre, dreary lustre shed.

And after him, on horseback, came a crew
Of figures, wrapped in cloaks inscribed with signs,
Each tended by the symbol creature due,
The eagle and the pard,
The wolf, the peacock and the stag with tines,
The ox, the goat, the hedgehog with his spines:
The last was one whose looking almost slew,
Who bore no symbol but a broken shard.

Then Arthur, catching at the donkey's rein,
Challenged the Sovereign as the priest had told,
Saying, "O Saturn, give my ring again!"
Then Saturn slowly spake.
"I, ageless, am most aged: I was old
Ere first a lichen sprouted upon mould,
And now I meet a man who prefers pain
On earth to bliss such as immortals take.

Accept your lesser fortune: take your gem."
Then, with a sudden waft of holy scent,
That loveliest flower of the immortal stem,
Venus herself, the Queen,
To Arthur from her golden saddle leant.
"Take back the troth-plight that you never meant,"
She said, and gave it. "Think not I condemn.
In exile I shall keep your memory green.

We pass to exile, you to reap your sowing,
We to the violet fields, you to your end,
We into peace and you to ebb and flowing;
But when the Fate cuts short,
When Life has no more penny left to spend,
When Will no longer makes your elbow bend,
Then, from my sea, O Love, I will come rowing,
My Queens and I, to bring you into port.

And now, farewell." And, as she spoke, a cock
Crowed from the gateway tower; the brazen gate
Jarred, rolling open at King Saturn's knock;
And all the glimmering crowd
Rode slowly through those forces of no date:
Last went the Death that held the broken fate.
Then Arthur, stunned, recovering from his shock,
Kissed his belovèd's ring and sang aloud.

MIDSUMMER NIGHT

MIDSUMMER night had fallen at full moon,
So, being weary of my ancient tale,
I turned into the night,
Up the old trackway leading from the vale.
The downland dimmed before me, dune on dune,
Pale dogrose buds about me shed their scent;
The startled peewits glimmered as they went,
The moonlight made the earth and heaven white;
The heaven and earth together uttered June.

So perfect was the beauty, that the air
Was like immortal presence thrilling all
The downland with deep life:
Presences communed in the white owl's call;
The rampart of the hill-top stood up bare,
High on the windy hill a brightness shone—
I wondered whose, since shepherd-men had gone
Homeward a long time since to food and wife;
Yet brightness shone, as from a lantern there.

Then, as the valley belfries chimed the hour,
I thought: "On summer nights King Arthur's door,
By yonder sarsens shut,
Is said to open to a corridor

Hewn far within the hill to Arthur's bower,
Where he and Gwenivere, with all the tale
Of captains toughened by the weight of mail,
Bide in a hall within the limestone cut:
That is the doorway, this is Arthur's hour."

So, pressing near, behold, a door was wide
Flung open on the steepness of the hill,
Showing a lighted shaft.
A footlift fox was paused upon the sill;
Eyes gleaming green, he fled. I stepped inside.
The passage led within all brightly lit,
Deft limestone hewers' hands had fashioned it.
Behind me (as I thought) the white owl laught.
The lighted way before me was my guide.

Till deep within the hill, I reacht a hall
Lit, but so vast that all aloft was dim.
The chivalry below
Sat at their table stirring not a limb.
Even as frost arrests the waterfall,
So had a power frozen that array,
There at the banquet of the holy day,
Into such stillness that I could not know
If they were dead, or carved, or living all.

Then, entering in, accustomed to the light,
I marked them well: King Arthur, black and keen,
Pale, eager, wise, intense;
Lime-blossom Gwenivere, the red-gold queen;
Ban's son, the kingly, Lancelot the bright;

Gawaine, Bors, Hector; all whom trumpets drew
Up Badon at the falling of the dew:
And over them there brooded the immense
Helper or Spirit with immortal sight.

All was most silent in that carven nave
Save a far water dripping, drop by drop,
In some dark way of time.
Power had brought that Knighthood to a stop,
Not even their ragged banners seemed to wave,
No whisper stirred the muscle of a cheek,
Yet all seemed waiting for the King to speak.
Far, far below I heard the midnight chime,
The valley bells that buried silence clave.

Then at that distant music Arthur stirred;
His scarlet mantle quivered like a wing.
Each, in his golden stall,
Smiling a little, turned towards the King,
Who from his throne of glory spoke this word:—
"Midsummer Night permits us to declare
How Nature's sickle cut us from the air
And made the splendour of our summer fall."
Then one by one they answered as I heard.

KING ARTHUR:

"I was the cause of the disastrous end . . .
I in my early manhood sowed the seed
That made the Kingdom rend.
I begot Modred in my young man's greed.
When the hot blood betrays us, who gives heed?

Morgause and I were lovers for a night,
Not knowing how the fates had made us kin.
So came the sword to smite,
So was the weapon whetted that made bleed:
That young man's loving let the ruin in.

GWENIVERE:

I, Gwenivere the Queen, destroyed the realm;
I, by my love of Lancelot the Bright;
Destiny being strong and mortals weak,
And women loving as the summer night.
When I was seized by Kolgrim Dragon Helm,
Lancelot saved me from the Dragon-beak,
Love for my saviour came to overwhelm.

Too well I loved him, for my only son,
Lacheu, was his, not Arthur's as men thought.
I longed to see my lover's son the King;
But Lacheu, riding into Wales, was caught
By pirates near St. David's and undone . . .
They killed my Lacheu there.
The primroses of spring,
Red with his blood, were scattered in his hair:
Thereafter nothing mattered to me aught . . .

Save Lancelot perhaps at bitter whiles,
When the long pain was more than I could stand;
He being Arthur's cousin, was his heir
Till base-born Modred reacht us from the isles.
Thereafter was no comfort anywhere,
But Modred's plottings and my sister's wiles,
And love that lit me ruining the land.

LANCELOT:

I, who am Lancelot, the son of Ban,
King Arthur's cousin, dealt the land the blow
From which the griefs began.
I, who loved Gwenivere, as all men know,
Was primal cause that brought the kingdom low,
For all was peace until that quarrel fell;
Thereafter red destruction followed fast.
The gates of hell
Hedge every daily track by which men go;
My loving flung them open as I passt.

GWENIVACH:

I, who am Princess Gwenivach the Fair,
Compasst the kingdom's ruin by my hate,
The poisonous hate I bare
For Gwenivere, my sister, Arthur's mate.
My mind was as a murderer in wait
Behind a door, on tiptoe, with a knife,
Ready to stab her at the slightest chance,
Stab to the life.
I stabbed her to the heart in her estate;
Disaster was my blow's inheritance.

MODRED:

Not you, with your begettings, father mine;
Not you, my red-gold Queen, adultress proud;
Not you, Sir Lancelot, whom none could beat;
Not you, my princess sweet;
Not one of all you waters was worth wine.

Mine was the hand that smote this royal seat,
Mine was the moving darkness that made cloud;
You were but nerves; I, Modred, was the spine.

You were poor puppets in a master's game;
I, Modred, was the cause of what befell.
I, Modred, Arthur's bastard, schemed and planned;
I, with my single hand,
Gave but a touch, and, lo, the troubles came;
The royalty was ended in the land.
When shut from Heaven, devils create hell:
Those who ignore this shall repent the same.

You were at peace, King Arthur, (cuckold's peace);
Your queen had both her lover and her son;
And I, your bastard by your aunt, was far,
Where Orkney tide-rips jar.
Your kingdom was all golden with increase.
Then your son's killing happened: Modred's star
Rose; I was heir, my bastardy was done;
Or (with more truth) I swore to make it cease.

But coming to your court with double claim
(As son and nephew) to the British crown,
You and the Queen named Lancelot the heir:
A brave man and a rare;
Your cousin King, the cuckoo to your dame,
Whom nobody opposed till I was there.
But I opposed, until I tumbled down
The realm to ruin and the Queen to shame.

GWENIVACH:

And I, your younger sister, whom you slighted,
Loved Modred from the first and took his part.
That made the milk of your sweet fortune sour.
I told you in the tower,
The green-hung tower, by the sunset lighted,
Sunset and moonrise falling the same hour;
Then I declared how Modred had my heart,
That we were lovers, that our troths were plighted.

You could have won our love, had you been wise;
Then, when, as lovers, we confesst and pled
Together with you for a lasting truce.
No blood would have been shed,
April and June had had their natural use,
And autumn come with brimming granaries.
But no; you gave refusal and abuse;
Therefore I smote your lips so harlot-red . . .
The joy of that one buffet never dies.

I see you at this moment, standing still,
White, by the window in that green-hung tower,
Just as I struck you, while your great eyes gleamed.
Till then, I had but seemed . . .
My striking showed you how I longed to kill.
O through what years of insult had I dreamed
For that one stroke in the avenging hour!
The devil of my hatred had her will:
God pity me, fate fell not as I deemed."

So, with lamenting of the ancient woe
They told their playings in the tragic plot,

Until their eyes were bright:
The red-gold beauty wept for Lancelot.
Then the church belfries in the vale below
Chimed the first hour of the year's decay,
And Arthur spoke: "Our hour glides away;
Gone is the dim perfection of the night,
Not yet does any trumpet bid us go.

But when the trumpet summons, we will rise,
We, who are fibres of the country's soul,
We will take horse and come
To purge the blot and make the broken whole;
And make a green abundance seem more wise,
And build the lasting beauty left unbuilt
Because of all the follies of our guilt.
But now the belfry chimes us to be dumb,
Colour is coming in the eastern skies."

Then as those figures lapsed again to stone,
The horses stamped, the cock his challenge flung,
The gold-wrought banners stirred,
The air was trembling from the belfry's tongue.
Above those forms the Helper stood alone,
Shining with hope. But now the dew was falling,
In unseen downland roosts the cocks were calling,
And dogrose petals shaken by a bird
Dropped from the blossomed briar and were strown.

THE FIGHT ON THE WALL

Modred was in the Water Tower
At Caerleon-on-Usk,
He saw Queen Gwenivere the flower
Go by at dusk.

She was disguised, but Modred knew her,
No cloak could veil such grace:
She was Queen Gwenivere: what drew her
To such a place?

She passt beneath the phare new-lighted,
He spied a red-gold tress
And gems upon a hand that righted
The wind-blown dress.

"Aha," he said, "My golden plover . . .
What go you out to do?
Queen, you are going to your lover;
I will go, too."

He dogged her through the unbuilt quarter,
Past heaps of brick and slate,
Scantlings and smoking lime and mortar,
To the East Gate.

Behind the East Gate turret-curtain
A rushlight flickered dim.
"Lancelot's room," he said; "It's certain
She goes to him."

He crouched behind her as she listened
And watched, to know all clear.
He thought: "You think it safe. It isn't . . .
Go on, my dear."

Then with a little clink, her sandal
Trod on the East Gate stair . . .
At turret-door one held a candle;
Her Knight was there.

"Lancelot," Modred said. "We take him;
His golden Queen and he;
Arthur will burn the slut and break him.
What joy for me."

Back to the palace Modred fareth
And there he finds Gawaine,
With's brothers Gaheris and Gareth
And Agravaine.

When Agravaine had learned the matter,
He said: "Knights, hearken here:
You thought my charges wicked chatter
Of Gwenivere.

Now she is trulling with her master,
That Lancelot of fame,

This spotless Queen of alabaster . . .
It is a shame . . .

It is a shame to them who do it
And worse to us who see.
I say, tell Arthur: let them rue it.
Do you agree?"

Then Gawaine said: "Be silent, brother,
And move no more in this:
Leave evil-speaking to another,
Leave it as 'tis."

Gareth and Gaheris replying
Said: "We will take no part
In dirty treacheries and spying
Foul as your heart."

"But I," Sir Modred answered sour,
"I will make one with you.
Arthur shall know within the hour
About these two.

You dainty Knights of spotless honour
May watch your Queen's disgrace,
But we will bring a judgment on her
And brand her face.

And Lancelot, that peer of traitors,
Shall be a public show."
Gawaine said: "You accursed haters
About it: go.

But know, that what you do will issue
In every grief made worse.
The present world of men will hiss you,
The future curse."

Gawaine and's brothers left in anger:
King Arthur entered in.
Modred said: "Take your Queen and hang her,
She lives in sin.

She trulls with Lancelot the splendid
Atop the East Gate stair;
Attack them now and they'll be ended,
Caught unaware."

"If it be so," said Arthur, "surely
The pair of them shall die.
Take men and bind the two securely."
Modred said "Ay."

Modred took Kolgrevance and's brothers
Kurslin and Petipase,
Galleron, Joure and seven others,
They went their ways . . .

They crosst the city's narrow alleys,
Now dark, the shops being shut;
They heard the night-wind in the salleys,
The fox in rut:

They heard the screech-owl at his calling
That charms the wood-mouse' ears,

And the tinkle of the water falling
At the bridge piers.

Soon they were near the East Gate tower;
A small light showed aloft.
"See," Modred said, "they're in our power:
Now creep in soft.

There's where the deer lies in her cover,
The red stag keeping guard:
Now we shall take her with her lover.
Bind them both hard."

They tiptoed up the winding stairway,
But Modred tiptoed last.
The jackdaw in the archer's airway
Blinkt as they passt.

They crept out on the paven landing
Atop the city wall.
It had a parapet and banding
Lest men should fall.

Between these ridges ran the footing
To where the tower rose;
The East Gate flanking-tower for shooting,
Loopholed for bows.

Thither they crept and stood there, straining
Their ears at the barred door:
The wind-cock up above complaining,
Creaked and gave o'er.

A silence was within the tower,
Naught touched on wood or stone;
Joure whispered: "This may be the bower,
The birds are flown."

They listened: then, within the hiding,
Gwenivere's voice said: "No . . .
It was the wind-cock spindle griding
As the flaws blow . . ."

Lancelot answered: "Not the spindle . . .
No; but another sound."
The listeners felt their spirits kindle,
The game was found.

Then beating on the door in fury,
They cried: "You traitor Knight!
You are taken now. We're judge and jury,
Come out and fight.

Come out!" and at the panels rashing
They strove to beat a way,
As through the scrum a pack goes crashing
In football play.

The door held to its bolts, being oaken.
"Come out," the dozen cried.
They rashed again: no bolts were broken,
No hinges wried.

Gwenivere whispered to her lover:
"Alas, we both are lost."

Lancelot had no arms nor cover,
A cloak at most.

"Alas, my Queen," Lancelot muttered,
"That I should die thus tamed;
Snuffed, like a candle that has guttered,
Leaving you shamed."

The arm-chest in the chamber angle
Was bare of points and blades,
He had two hands with which to strangle:
No other aids.

"Come out," the dozen cried: "No quarter
If we are forced to storm."
"Go, Joure," said Modred, "to the dorter . . .
Bring up a form . . .

We're bringing up a form to batter
The door about your ears . . .
We'll have your head upon a platter,
My prince, sans peers.

And you, my red-haired quean, your trollop,
Let you make no mistake,
Shall go in smock like a cook's collop
To burn at stake."

Lancelot said: "This filthy crying
Is more than I can stand:
Better than hearing this were dying
Death out of hand.

O Queen," he said, "the times are over
That you and I have known.
Belovèd Queen, I am your lover,
Body and bone,

Spirit and all of me, past knowing,
Most beautiful, though sin.
Now the old lovely days are going
And bad begin.

I shall die here, but whatsoever
May come of me, my friends
Will stand to succour you forever
Until life ends.

Farewell, beloved beauty peerless,
My star since I began;
You were my light when life was cheerless,
You made me man.

In many a foray, many a stour,
In many a deathy place,
Your thought has blesst me like a flower
And given me grace.

Now would that I had arms upon me
Until my powers fail,
What I would do before they won me
Would make a tale."

At this, the running twelve came battering
Their form against the door,

A panel yielded to the shattering,
They staved two more . . .

They cried: "Three more, and we shall take him,
This captain of the King;
Let this one hit the bolt and break him
Together . . . Ding."

Lancelot said: "Give over knocking,
I will unbar: let be . . .
I will undo . . . I am not mocking . . .
Come capture me."

He drew the bolt and opened to them
And stared into the dark,
By the thin taper's light he knew them
All he could mark.

Even as wolf-hounds snarl and cower
About the wolf at bay,
Those shrank till Kolgrevance of Gower
Leapt at his prey.

Kolgrevance shouted: "Now I have him,"
And slashed, but the cut misst.
Then Lancelot a buffet gave him
With the clencht fist:

A brain-pan blow that laid him sprawling
Dead on the turret floor:
Lancelot, while the corpse was falling
Bolted the door.

Bolted it just before the others
Charged with their blows, too late.
Lancelot said: "You misst me, brothers,
Now you must wait."

Then as they beat the panels, railing
Like dogs the stag has gored,
Lancelot donned the corpse's mailing
And took his sword.

Modred and Agravaine together
Cried: "Out, you traitor, out."
Lancelot answered: "Cease your blether;
You need not shout.

Go from the door: I promise truly
That if you go from here,
Naming your place and hour, duly
I will appear

Before the Court in judgment sitting
Against what charge you bring
I'll answer all, to my acquitting
From him the King."

"Arthur has damned you both already,
To death," Modred replied,
"To death by us, and we are ready,
So come outside."

"If that be so," he answered, "surely
My portion is but hard.

I warn you, keep yourselves securely" . . .
Then he unbarred.

Then storming armoured from his prison
He strode out to the wall.
Since the man's death the moon had risen:
He saw them all.

There was no room in that grim alley
For more than two abreast.
The meyny charged him at his sally,
They smote his crest.

But ducking from their swords uplifted,
He grappled those who led—
Agravaine, Lot's son, called The Gifted,
Lovel the Red.

Agravaine cried to those behind him:
"Stand back, friends; give us room."
He felt a sudden lightning blind him,
He felt Death's doom;

Knew not how Lancelot had stricken,
But felt the blow destroy
The gifts that made his hearers quicken
From calm to joy.

Stumbling, he saw bright waters gleaming
With star-gleams spark on spark,
Then he struck stone, then all was seeming,
Then all was dark.

Before he clanged upon the paving,
Lovel the Red was in,
Crying: "Come, friends; he's ours past saving . . .
Die in your sin . . .

Die," and he struck, struck twice, but tamely,
Being too near his mark.
Lancelot, closing, gripped him gamely
And struck him stark,

And swung him as a shield before him
As guard to Kurslin's axe,
Which struck Sir Lovel fair and tore him
As cards tear flax.

Lovel fell back upon his slayer
But Kurslin thrust him clear:
He cried, "Where is this Queen's betrayer?
I'll kill him here."

But Lovel's body made him stumble,
And Lancelot cried: "Not so . . .
I betray no one, friend, be humble,
Get out, man . . . go."

And Lancelot struck him surely straightway
Over the gangway wall,
Down to the entrance of the gateway
Men heard the fall.

And at the crash the party wavered
And fell back to the stair;

Having four champions dead, they quavered;
He watched them there.

Then Mador, of the White Rock Leaguer
That guards the Wye Mouth Ford,
Lured by the smile of death was eager
And tosst his sword,

And cried: "Now, Lancelot, my brother,
Have at you, with good heart,
One of us two will kill the other
Before we part.

Remember now our ancient quarrel
About that pasture-right.
Now one of us shall earn a laurel:
Have at you . . . fight."

Then rushing as the wild boar rushes
In some oak glade of Dean,
He scored his gashes with his tushes
So bitter keen.

Two slashes right and left made fire
On Lancelot's armour bright:
Lancelot's sword fell like a geier
From heaven's height,

A geier, that aloft in heaven
Stares at the sun unblind . . .
Then plunges headlong like the leven
Upon the hind:

So swept the broadsword from its eyry
Shrieking to seek its own,
Beating its port and clanging fiery
Through steel, through bone,

Through marrow to the life, so sweeping
Lancelot's smiting scored . . .
And Mador's soul had done with keeping
The swift Wye ford.

And Mador drooped and toppled over,
That loud-voiced ward of Wye,
To feed no more on the green clover
The white-faced kye,

To hear no more sand-raddled Severn
Pass out to sea in song,
But fill a grass-plot at St. Keverne
Not six feet long.

And seeing Mador dead, the seven
Cried: "All together . . . now,
Down with the traitor: help us heaven,
Pull stroke, pull bow."

Petipase led their meyny shouting
The cries of the sea host,
He being a sailor tanned from scouting
The Saxon coast.

He had a short axe poised for striking
Lancelot's skull apart,

Lancelot sent his sword-point spiking
Athwart his heart.

And leaping, Petipase remembered
The red sails of his ships,
Then he collapsed like one dismembered
And in eclipse.

But knew among the gleams and crying
Through which his soul was wrencht,
That other men than he were dying
And that they blencht.

For Lancelot, his point withdrawing,
Struck Florens with the edge
Over the brow, that he fell clawing
Against the ledge.

Then as Joure sprang, the great Knight quickly
So smote him with his shield,
That Joure's manhood was made sickly,
He drooped, he reeled,

And straight, before he fell, the ravage
Of the sharp sword-edge came
Swift as the coming of the savage
Who goes in flame.

And Joure fell and clanged in falling,
But heard before he died
The ring of the triumphant calling
Lancelot cried:

For as the shaken four were backing,
Lancelot cried his cry
That led like trumpets in attacking
To victory,

And charging as he cried, he drove them
Back to the winding stair,
Where two men making stand, he clove them,
Maelgon and Gare.

Then leaping down the steps pursuing,
He cut down Galleron:
But he who set the trouble brewing,
Modred, was gone . . .

Gone screaming in his dread to cover
Across the sleeping town.
Lancelot turned him to his lover
And sat him down.

Then after all that crash of warring
Came silence, without thrill:
Kolgrevance quiet on the flooring,
The lovers still.

Outside, the city slept; the water
Moaned at the bridge's piers,
The moonlight blancht that place of slaughter,
The dew dripped tears.

The white mist, from the river wreathing,
Shrouded the river ground:

But for the dew and the two breathing,
There was no sound.

Gwenivere spoke at last: "O glory
Of all Knights among men,
This of to-night will be a story
Not matched agen."

A silence followed in the tower
Save for the Knight's deep breath.
Horror had followed on the power
Of dealing death.

By the dim flicker of the taper
Sir Lancelot discerned
How in her face as white as paper
The Queen's eyes burned.

Deep in the panels of the walling
He heard the death-tick knock,
The dewdrops from the aspens falling
Ticked like a clock.

Then in the convent tower a tolling
Called nuns into the tower.
Lancelot said: "Past man's controlling
Are place and hour.

I had no quarrel with the meyny
Nor did I know them all,
But Life is not at peace with any
And her blows fall.

Now all our hours of joy together
Are past, our share henceforth
Will be but bitterness, with weather
Out of the north.

This day, beginning in the quire
Where now the ladies sing,
Will make our glory of desire
Another thing.

For I foresee the Kingdom breaking
Asunder from all this:
Out of the welter of man's making
What must be is.

Here is the prelude to the story
That leads us to the grave.
So be it: we have had a glory
Not many have.

Though what to-morrow may discover
Be harsh to what has been,
No matter, I am still your lover
And you my queen."

THE BREAKING OF THE LINKS *

They told King Arthur how the Knights were killed,
He saw the bodies carried by on biers
By torchlight, among faces, under spears;
He knew what misery had been begun;
The doors and shutters banged: the city thrilled.
"The mob will murder Gwenivere," he thought.
The Queen sat haggard like a soul distraught.
"Courage," he whispered; "Much may yet be done."
He led her quaywards as the forum filled.

And while the rabble gathered in the square,
He set her in his galley and bade sail.
He watched the galley whitening a trail
Down eddied Usk for towered Camelot.
"But Lancelot," he thought, "they will not spare,
These widows and these takers of the feud.
He must begone at once before pursued."
Therefore he sent Sir Bors to Lancelot,
Who drew him north, the townsfolk unaware.

Soon, when the colour-giving dawn had come,
The kinsfolk of the dead came, crying all
For vengeance on the killer, to the hall.

* See also page 125.

"Bring out this royal harlot and her man.
These ruiners of all shall pay for some.
Where are they, Arthur? Bring them out," they cried.
"Where are this strumpet and her homicide?
Burn them, the traitor and his harridan;
Punish their murderings by martyrdom."

Then Arthur said, "Keep silence here; the Queen
Is gone from here: so Lancelot has gone.
As to the killings, we shall think thereon
At ripest leisure." Modred answered "No.
No royalty or loyalty can screen
Treason like theirs; their hot adulteries,
Their plots that sought the Kingdom for a prize,
Their slaughterings, that laid our kinsmen low."
"No," the crowd yelled, "they shall not get off clean."

"No," Modred said. "For, King, you cannot know
The truth of this. Last night at your behest
I went, with friends, with warrant, to arrest
This Lancelot for treasons to the crown.
We summoned him to court: he would not go.
We strove to take him, he resisted: then,
Doing their duty, all those dozen men,
Man after man, were harshly beaten down.
Not by the killer's greater manhood; no . . .

No, but because within that narrow hold
Only one man could reach him at a time;
Nor was the Queen inactive in the crime . . .
Those dozen sworders held her in regard;

Her presence helped the one a hundredfold;
She helped to arm him; being armed, she stood
So that we dared not tackle nor make good
Our comrades' efforts; our approach was barred,
We must have wounded her had we been bold.

True, harsher captains might indeed have laid
Hands on the Queen and dragged her headlong thence;
But with what scandal and with what offence?
Mad as we were, we would not shame her thus.
Besides, the only purpose of the raid
Was to take Lancelot; we held no brief
To touch the partner, but arrest the chief . . .
So, holding back, destruction fell on us.
They have escaped, but God will see us paid."

Then Gawaine said: "What need was there to send
Armed men upon the Queen and Lancelot,
The King's wife and King's cousin, as all wot?
The two are daily in the palace here;
At one word spoken, either would attend.
But I perceive that jealousy begins
To conquer wisdom by imputing sins . . .
With Lancelot away and Modred near,
A royal bastard's fortune might amend. . . .

I will not silence, I will speak my word
To you, my cousin Arthur, and to one
At once my mother's and my cousin's son,
Who, with twelve captains, made a night surprise;
Against one lion, thirteen in a herd,

(Or fourteen was it?) By the starry skies
God made His vision of the matter plain.
Yet here this mongrel Modred dares complain. . . .
I say he should be branded and unspurred."

Then Arthur said, "But I support him, I.
Against your cavils in the present cause;
He served against a breaker of the laws
At his life's peril, among comrades killed.
And proven treasons, not a jealousy,
Make the foundations upon which we build.
Treasons that amply justified arrest.
As Fate has fallen, I have judged it best
To wait a certain season ere we try. . . .

Therefore the two accused are banisht hence,
Awaiting trial. Meanwhile Modred did,
Or strove to do, exactly as I bid."
"Ay," the crowd shouted, "everybody knows
Gawaine can argue in a trot's defence.
He takes their part." Gawaine said, "I suppose
My cousin-brother now will govern us.
Now I remember what the ship-rat does . . .
When ships begin to leak, he scuttles thence.

Therefore, my cousin Arthur, chief and King,
I say good-bye: I say you are misled
By plottings from this misbegotten head.
Not lightly will this cloud of evil pass.
I, like the swallow, joined you in your spring,
When first the daisies whitened all the grass;

Now autumn spiders come and leaves are blowing,
The summer being gone, I must be going."
Then Bors and Hector strode into the ring.

Bors said, "I brought Sir Lancelot away
For Gloucester and the north, as I was told.
The time has come for speakers to be bold.
Why was our captain banisht without trial?
Who sent the gang, commanding them to slay?
Since when were Tablers subject to espial?
I say, as Gawaine says, you take advice
From one whose plottings shall not use me twice.
Since Modred governs, I shall not obey."

Sir Hector said, "I do not ask the cause . . .
For men who fling the best and keep the worst
Are men whose fortunes are about to burst,
As yours are, Arthur, acting as you do.
A golden eagle cannot sort with daws,
Nor will this mongrel Modred sort with you;
Nor we with him, by heaven, so farewell.
We choose the Queen and Lancelot and hell,
And leave you folly, Modred and the laws."

Then out the three defiant captains strode.
Their friends and kin, the party of the Queen,
Followed them out: all silent was the scene;
All present knew what breaking of the links
That bound the provinces together bode:
Nothing was heard except the little clinks
Of spurs on flagstones: then the horses sparred,

Sidling from men who mounted in the yard;
Then the slow horse-hoofs died along the road.

And while their going sounded, men were still.
Then Agravaine's gaunt widow, white with hate,
Cried, "Shall our murdered darlings' spirits wait
Thus long for simple justice for their death?"
Then horse-hoofs clattered to the portal-sill,
A rider tottered to them spent for breath;
He cried, "I've galloped from the Kentish prince,
I have not drank these thirty hours since.
Get ready for a second Badon Hill."

Then he sank, panting, till they gave him wine
And splashed his face with water; then he said:
"King Iddoc says this is no common raid,
No, but an over-swarming, such as comes
Only when blazing comets give the sign
And banded nations seek elysiums . . .
Three hundred ships were counted at the first,
More follow fast, we haven't toucht the worst.
They made our army snap like broken twine.

Who are they? Why, the manhood of a race
Or races, banded by an oath to seize
A Kingdom for themselves beyond the seas:
The summer pirates join with them besides.
Our ships attacked them at the landing-place,
Their ships destroyed them; now their navy rides
Holding the ocean to Augusta tower.
King Iddoc fought them in an evil hour.
They thrashed us out of knowledge and gave chase.

Briefly, the width of Kent is overrun;
They hold the Channel; beyond any doubt
They will advance before the moon is out
And toss your men-at-arms like meadow-hay;
They are fell fighters, every mother's son.
But will you muster with what men you may
And join King Iddoc? If the truth be told,
Whatever line we take we cannot hold;
They are our masters, Arthur, we are done."

Then Arthur said, "Whatever fair success
These pirates have, I never knew it last.
For when they seem the worst the worst is past;
They conquer first, then suffer for supply.
Therefore be comforted in your distress,
We suffer first and conquer by-and-by.
I start for Camelot at once from here;
By harvest we will have the Kingdom clear
Whatever Iddoc's fears are, I say yes.

Come, Modred, we must sail for Camelot
Within the hour, or we lose the tide.
Dismiss the court, the other things must bide."
But as he passt, that wraith of Agravaine's
Cried, "You have trickt us, Modred misbegot,
You killed our loves and leave us to our pains.
You shall not go until our cause is heard."
Here the guards seized her, but her witch's gird
Rang through the hall and was forgotten not.

"Modred betrayed us, it is all laid bare.
He used our husbands only to disgrace

The Queen and Lancelot and take their place.
And all our lovely lovers are laid dead,
While he removes to Camelot to share
King Arthur's favour; curses on his head.
But you shall perish by the plots begun,
Son by the sire, sire by the son,
Before one swallow seeks the southern air."

But now King Arthur was aboard his ship,
Rushing from Usk athwart the Severn stream;
War lay ahead, the rest was but a dream:
Modred beside him shared his busy brain.
His galley took a white bone in her grip,
The running bubbles made a noise like rain;
And though he missed two comrades from of old,
His son was by him and his heart was bold
To break the raid by this new comradeship.

GWENIVACH TELLS

I, Gwenivach, King Modred's queen, declare
What happened next: I, Gwenivach, accurst,
Being born very little but most fair.
King Arthur marched his army into Kent
And suffered loss at first:
I said to Modred, "See, the gods prepare
Your fortunes for you; take the chances sent."

Small need had he for prompting; he arose,
He and myself and all our chosen band;
He seized the crown and governed as he chose.
The gutters reddened from our glutted hate.
Had we but laid a hand
On Gwenivere, she should have died, God knows;
But she escaped us for a bitterer fate.

Throughout we triumphed: Modred was the King,
I was the Queen, from Gelliwic to Wales.
Sir Kolgrim joined us from his pirating,
Bringing, to swell our army, all the crews
That manned his hundred sails.
Well to our side did Fortune's balance swing:
Then Fortune changed; a rider came with news.

These were the news: that, Arthur had destroyed
The heathen fleet and army and had turned
To make our treasoned usurpation void,
Marching like fire on a windy day;
That, when our subjects learned
His coming, they renounced us overjoyed.
So our red morning had an evening grey.

We saw their malice snicker in the street
In Camelot: would God we had had time
To blast their pleasure in my love's defeat;
Some of those sneerers should have had white lips,
And eyeballs seared with lime.
But Modred gave the order to retreat;
We marched to Cornwall to Sir Kolgrim's ships.

And there we waited Fate and Fortune's chance,
Camped above harbour on the windy down.
Spies brought us word of Arthur's swift advance,
Then that he halted like a man in doubt
In that burnt Roman town.
Then lurching at us like a launching lance,
He camped in hail and hung his colours out.

ARTHUR IN THE RUINS

KING ARTHUR watched within the ruined town,
Debating what to do and what avoid;
No sleep was there for his tormented brain.
War lay behind; before, were war and pain,
The column of the Kingdom fallen down,
With all that he had struggled for destroyed.
For if he fought his son,
The heathen would re-win what he had won;
And if he did not . . . there it was again.

So, being heart-sick, saying "I must rest,"
He turned him to his blanket on the stones
Grass-sprouted, of a roofless temple's floor.
The sky above her bright-eyed watchers bore
Now that the youngling moon had wilted west.
Miswandered beetles fumbled out with drones.
And there a woman stood
Star-semée, with a planet in her hood,
Live with such beauty as the morning owns.

"Arthur," she said, "these many weary days
You have desired help where none has been.
To captain souls, in their intensest grief,
No comrade understanding gives relief,

Or brings that balm of the discouraged, praise:
Sweet friendship cannot come to King and Queen;
But we immortals come,
Sometimes, to help them in their martyrdom,
As sunlight comes upon the summer leaf.

You know that what I counsel will be true,
True as your inmost self at whitest heat
That touches All-Truth, and, as such, endures.
All courses that perplex men with their lures
Perplex you now with anguish, which to do.
So may the summer poppies hide the wheat.
This single thing must be:—
Battle with Modred by the western sea;
Of all man's destined courses, this is yours.

This will but seem a vision of the night
Rede-ing you falsely: let me prove it true:—
In the grey morning, as you march the Heath,
Left of the road a woman with a wreath,
Broad-browed, like me, in raiment crosst with white,
Yearning towards you there, will welcome you.
'King,' she will say, 'Go on.
Eternal glory waits in Avalon,
In Avalon the sword will find its sheath.' "

At dawn King Arthur bade the trumpets call
"Strike camp and march;" and as King Arthur rode,
Lo, by the crossways in the heathy place,
A broad-browed woman with a noble face,
Wreathed with the little toadflax from the wall,

With white-crosst garments, from the heather strode
Towards him, and declared
Those self-same words: then on King Arthur fared
West, from the downlands to the Cornish chase.

THE FIGHT AT CAMLAN

Soon the two armies were in touch, and soon
Camped, face to face, upon the windy, high,
Thyme-scented barren where the wild bees croon.
Southward and westward was the wrinkled sea
Where Kolgrim's ships lay black.
Now must they treat or battle, since to fly
No longer was a solace that might be.
The season neared midsummer and full moon;
His impulse urged King Arthur to attack.

Then thought, and pity of his son, and hate
Of shedding subjects' blood, made him resolve
To make an offer ere he shut the gate
On every end save battle to the death.
He sent Sir Bedwyr forth
To Modred, to discover what might solve
Their quarrel without quell of living breath.
Modred replied, "Let Arthur abdicate
This southern half the realm, and keep the north.

If he contemn this, say I shall not treat
Or commune, save as King with equal King.
Here is my army, yonder is my fleet;
Cornwall is mine, I can maintain it mine;

I am prepared to fight.
But if my modest terms can end the thing,
And all this southern realm be paid as fine,
We'll choose ambassadors and let them meet
There on that barrow, in the armies' sight."

So, to be brief, both men empowered peers
To make discussion of the terms of peace.
The barrow, of the King of ancient years,
Topped by a thorn tree, was the meeting-place.
There six from either side
Went, while the heralds bade all warfare cease,
No sword to leave its sheath, no bow its case,
The horsemen to dismount and pile their spears
And all keep camp till all were ratified.

The twelve Knights went unarmed up to the howe
Between the armies, to debate together;
They hung a white flag on the hawthorn bough
And started talking, while the troops in camp
Disarmed, and cleaned their gear,
Or stretcht to sleep upon the matted heather;
Or with their comrades sat upon the ramp,
Sure that the quarrel would be settled now;
Each hailed the other side with mock or cheer.

To eastwards of the campments was a mound
Or rise of earth from some old fallen fence
Of ancient village, camp, or cattle-pound;
Three rebels flung themselves upon its top
With Kolgrim, Modred's friend,

Who mocked and said: "These talkers have no sense."
Then, hours later, "Let this folly stop . . .
There goes King Arthur; let us shoot the hound,
Crown Modred King and bring it to an end."

Prone in the heath the four uncased their bows,
They strung them, on each other's bodies stayed;
Then from their quivers each an arrow chose.
Arthur was sitting with Sir Kai in talk,
Making an easy mark.
Back to the ears the arrow-feathers laid,
Then, as the hornet leaves his hollow balk
Humming with evil, so the arrows rose,
Shot from the string to strike the victim stark.

Sweeping the space those shafted barbings sped,
Like golden birds athwart the light they thrilled:
One pierced Kai's bitter heart and struck him dead,
Another cut King Arthur's purple cloak;
Another, by his hand
Stuck quivering in the table till it stilled;
The last struck sideways on a shield and broke
Below the barbs, its venomed fang unfed.
"Quick, mates, again," said Kolgrim to his band.

But as they drew, King Arthur's herald cried:
"Treason! The men are shooting! Quick. Beware."
Then, leaping up, he thrust the King aside
And shouted "Treason! Fall in, Arthur's men."
And as he snatcht a shield
The second flighting shafted through the air
That struck him through and put him out of ken

Of wife and home by pleasant Severnside.
Then trumpets blew and tumult filled the field.

The counsellors upon the barrow fled,
Each to his camp, not knowing what betid;
King Arthur's men into their cohorts sped,
Swearing, "We'll pay these breakers of the truce,
Oath-breaking, treacherous swine."
The black-backt adder to her cavern glid;
Now Modred's archers let their arrows loose,
And many a grey goose-feather was made red,
Ere either army formed a battle-line.

Now the two armies stood as walls of spears
Beneath the ever-passing shriek and strike
Of arrows wavering in their careers.
Modred came swooping as a falcon swoops,
On horseback down his ranks,
Crying: "Behold your sparrows: play the shrike."
The trumpets blared among the rebel troops,
King Arthur galloped to his front with cheers;
He cried: "If fronts are stubborn, try the flanks."

Then as in thunderstorms the wind-vanes shift
On towers, against blackness, with a gleam,
So did his riders' spearheads glitter swift
Above the blowing pennons as they drooped
As one, down to the charge.
Then did the stallions bare their gums and scream,
The bright bits tightened as the riders stooped;
Then like a lightning from a thunder rift
The squadrons clashed together, lance on targe.

For hours they fought: then Arthur, beaten back
From camp and downland to the planted fields,
Steadied his line against the spent attack;
The armies stopped the battle to re-form.
Thirst-broken soldiers quencht
Their thirsts, and dropped their lances and their shields.
There fell the central quiet of the storm,
And spearmen strayed, to rob the haversack
Of friend or rebel prone with muscles clencht.

And while the battle stayed, Sir Modred found
No plenishment of spears and arrows spent
Save what the fight had scattered on the ground;
But Arthur formed upon his waggon-train
That brought him up new gear.
Archers and lancers took fresh armament
And faced to front, resolved to fight again.
Then Arthur heard a distant trumpet sound,
And, looking, saw strange horsemen in his rear.

And as he moved some lancers as a guard,
Thinking that Modred threatened his retreat,
He saw the banner of the golden pard;
Sir Lancelot was riding in to aid
With squadrons of picked horse.
Lancelot said, "Though banisht, let us meet
To put an ending to this renegade:
See, his line wavers: let us push him hard;
He'll break as sure as prickles grow on gorse."

It was now drawing to the summer dusk,
The sun, low fallen, reddened on the sea,

Dog-rose and honeysuckle shed their musk;
Lancelot's troops moved up upon the left,
King Arthur took the right.
It was the hour of the homing bee.
Then up the bright blades glittered on the heft,
The dragon of red battle bared her tusk,
King Arthur's tattering trumpets sounded Fight.

At a slow trot they started, keeping touch,
Elbow to elbow, upon rested horses
That strove to get the bits within their clutch;
Troop after troop the hoof-beat thunder grew;
Slowly the trot increast
As Lammas torrents grow in watercourses;
Then, utterly triumphant trumpets blew
And as a mounting wave, already much,
Mounts mighty ere it smashes into yeast,

So mounted there that billow ere it broke;
Then, at its breaking, Modred, branch and root,
Horseman and footman, scattered like blown smoke
From burning leaves on an October blast.
Then mile on moorland mile,
King Arthur's army had them in pursuit;
Arthur with six Knights followed Modred fast,
Till on a beach he turned to strike a stroke.
Ten, against Arthur's seven, seemed worth while.

THE FIGHT ON THE BEACH, OR THE PASSING

THESE were the nine with Modred:—Kolgrim, Gor,
Bein Bloodsark, Stagfoot, Odwin, Addersfang,
Math, Erbin, Breuse, nine scoundrels in a gang,
Three pirates and three outlaws and three knaves.
They turned upon the shore,
And Kolgrim said, "The battle has been lost,
But some beside the beaten shall have graves:
Some of these conquerors shall pay the cost."
These were the six with Arthur:—Owain Mor,

(Gwenivere's brother), from the March of Wales,
Bedwyr, the Cornish Knight, whom Tristan fooled;
Lucan, the Golden, whom King Ban had schooled;
Prince Ryence, Girl-Face, beautiful as Spring;
Ambrose of whom the tales
Still linger by the hearthstones of the west;
And Maximin, the son of Ban the King,
Of all deer-footed runners he was best:
These six now cast their lives into the scales.

And first the giant Owain, called the Red,
Riding in front, put spurs, and with his axe
Killed Math and Sigurd Stagfoot with two hacks;
The Stagfoot, falling, wrenched the haft away.

Here Owain's horse was sped.
He snatched Breuse' javelin as the stallion fell,
He speared Breuse through beneath the shoulder stay,
Addersfang cracked his helmet like a shell;
He grappled Addersfang as Breuse fell dead.

Bein Bloodsark struck him in the back, but he
Brought Addersfang from saddle; then he reeled,
Clutching that panting body as a shield.
Addersfang's horse upset him, Erbin struck,
He could no longer see:
But with his knife he thrust at Addersfang
Under the buckles, twice, and had good luck,
Leaving the hangman but a corpse to hang;
Dying, he muttered, "Four, or was it three?"

King Kolgrim rode at Ryence with a thrust
That speared him through and flung him to the sand;
The lance-head broke, but with the stump in hand
Kolgrim struck Ambrose overthwart the face;
Ambrose reeled back, but just
Just as King Kolgrim had his axe to strike,
Maximin knocked him over with a mace;
Kolgrim rose dizzy, grinning like a pike,
Ambrose's javelin struck him to the dust.

Bein Bloodsark strode across him and cleared ground.
Men were dismounted now, their horses loose.
Kolgrim rose dying with, "I broke the truce . . .
One other thing I'll break before I die."
His sinews were unbound,

He lapsed face forward slowly and forgot.
Then each man shouted out his battle-cry,
The two sides clashed together in a clot,
Iron with iron meeting, wolf with hound.

Modred killed Ambrose dead, that Knight of Dean;
Erbin sore-wounded Bedwyr; Lucan dropped,
Stunned by a mace-blow which his helmet stopped,
(Odwin the Smiter dealt it as he rushed);
Odwin struck Maximin,
Breaking his guard; he swung and struck again;
The golden leopard of the crest was crushed,
Swift darkness crashed upon the young man's brain,
Dead fell that youngling of the golden queen.

Then for an instant Arthur fought with five.
He slipped from Modred's blow and swept at Gor
A slash athwart the neck that made them four;
Bein stabbed him at the sword-belt as he smote.
Arthur saw Odwin drive
Towards him, with his mallet swung aloft;
Short'ning his point, he took him in the throat;
Odwin's mace toppled from his grip, he coughed
And fell upon the sand no more alive.

Erbin struck Arthur on the shoulder: Bein
Stabbed him again, a short-arm body-stab:
Then Modred gripped his ankles like a crab,
Meaning to trip, but Arthur shook him clear,
Then slipped in the bright brine,

For now the tide was coming. As he slipped
His left hand clutcht the butt of Erbin's spear;
He wrencht the shaft from Erbin as he dipped
And stabbed him through the heart spoon with the tine.

Modred and Bein came at him as he rose
Among the ripples of the gleaming sea.
He swerved aside and stumbled on his knee:
Bein fell across him, blocking Modred's way.
With moonlight-glinting blows
They struck each other, and the splashings shone,
Like salmon-leapings, as they tried to slay:
Then, at a lunge from Arthur, Bein was gone,
Heart-stricken with his vague hands clutching oaze.

Modred drew backward, seeing Bloodsark killed.
"Modred," King Arthur said, "surrender here.
Your treacheries have cost this Kingdom dear.
They cannot prosper, Modred: let them end."
The brimming ripples spilled
Their brightness on the bodies of the dead.
"I am your father, Modred, and your friend,"
King Arthur pleaded, "and your shot has sped.
I would have granted much of what you willed

Had you but told me: it is not too late
To come to some agreement, you and I.
Come up, above the tides, and let us try."
He stood near Modred on the moonlit sand.
Modred was still as hate;
He made no answer, but he breathed deep breath.
Sore-wounded Bedwyr, propping with his hand,

Cried, "Arthur, bind me: I shall bleed to death."
"I'll bind you," Lucan answered, "only wait. . . .

One moment, till this dizziness is past."
The ripples swayed the bodies up the beach.
Then Modred said, "A sweet forgiving speech,
More than a bastard rebel can deserve.
I shook the dice and cast
A great throw to be quit of men's contempt.
'Bastard,' they called me; but the bastard's nerve
Came nearer Kingdom's conquest than they dreamt.
I fail; my one endeavor is my last.

I spit upon your fatherhood and you.
You be my friend, who made me suffer scorn
From every living soul since I was born?
My friend, you think? You sorry cuckold; no.
But an account is due
And shall be paid, O luster that begat.
Down to the hell of all my hatings, go."
Then, leaping forward like an angry cat,
He struck his father on the headpiece, through.

Three blows he struck, not heeding Arthur's thrust;
Then, shaking clear, his features wrenched aside,
Marshlighted deathward, he collapsed and died:
"Thirty years' anguish," were his latest words,
"Made by your idle lust."
Arthur, with both hands groping outward, swayed;
The tide-brink touched his ankles with its curds:
Sick Bedwyr was beginning to upbraid:—
"O come to stop this bleeding! O you must."

Then Arthur reeled towards him, saying "Where?
Where are you wounded, Bedwyr?" Then he knelt,
Tented the wound and bound it with his belt,
And raised Sir Bedwyr's head; his own bled fast.
Then Lucan, crawling, bare
Drink from the brook for Bedwyr, but it spilled.
Then Arthur said, "This hour is my last.
Modred is dead, I killed him; I am killed.
Call, Lucan, if our friends are anywhere."

So Lucan called, a hurt man's feeble cry.
No answer followed save a stir of wings,
That and the creeping water's whisperings
Ant-like about the bodies of the dead.
Then Arthur said, "Good-bye,
O you two faithful who have followed me
With loving service ever since I led.
I give as bitter payment as the sea,
Hard days when living, hard death when you die."

Then, moving from them for a little space,
His spirit felt the promptings of the blood
That now the brimming tides were at the flood,
And that the ebb would carry him afar.
West from the rocks a race
Streamed seawards, speckt with bubble-broken white.
Lamplike before him was the evening star.
He said, "My comrades perish, touch and sight . . .
The feast is finished: let me utter grace."

He faced the western star with lifted hand,
While muddled thoughts and clear thoughts clanged and passt,
Of splendid things, if life could only last,
And long-dead friends, and kindnesses undone
And good things hoped or planned
That life would none of: then he took his sword,
Red once at Badon, red, now, from his son.
He bound about its hilt the priested cord;
He said, "The tide is setting from the land,

And I, too, set; but yet, before I go,
This that King Uther, yes, and Ambrose bare
In battles with the pirates everywhere,
Our House's Luck, this Britain's Bright Defense,
My Fortune in the flow,
Must take the ebb, if I have strength to fling."
He tottered to the water and stood tense;
The moon and the moon's image watched the King,
The weltering water ceased her to-and-fro.

He gathered up his dying strength, he swung
The weapon thrice and hurled it to the stream;
It whirled like a white gannet with a gleam,
Turning blade up in moonlight as it fell;
Bright-flying foam-drops stung
The steel, the spray leapt as it disappeared.
"No other man shall have you: all is well,"
King Arthur said; and now his moment neared;
The tide was ebbing and his heart was wrung.

A curlew called: he fell upon his knees,
And lo, his failing eyes beheld a ship
Burning a path athwart the water-rip;
The water gleamed about her like soft flame,
Her gear creaked in the breeze;
Towards him, nosing through the soaken sand,
To rest her at his side, the vessel came.
His Helper held the tiller in her hand;
His Friend was come, to comfort his disease.

Then seven queens upraised the dying king
And laid him quiet in a bed aboard,
And balmed the gashes smitten with the sword;
Immortal life upon their faces glowed.
Then they began to sing:—
"We bear him to the isle of Avalon,
Where everlasting summer has abode."
An unheard summons bade the ship begone,
She headed seawards with a stooping wing.

Lucan and Bedwyr, propping as they might,
Watched as she passed: they heard the singing range
Through secrets of things hidden and things strange,
And things of beauty not yet found in thought.
The ship seemed made of light,
She travelled by the thrilling of the hymn;
The race a moment with her passing fought,
Then she was on into the distance dim,
And on beyond, and on, and out of sight.

GWENIVERE TELLS

So Arthur passed, but country-folk believe
He will return, to triumph and achieve;
Men watch for him on each Midsummer Eve.

They watch in vain, for ere that night was sped,
That ship reached Avalon with Arthur dead;
I, Gwenivere, helped cere him, within lead.

I, Gwenivere, helped bury him in crypt,
Under cold flagstones that the ringbolts shipped;
The hangings waved, the yellow candles dripped.

Anon I made profession, and took vows
As nun encloistered: I became Christ's spouse,
At Amesbury, as Abbess to the house.

I changed my ermines for a goat-hair stole,
I broke my beauty there, with dule and dole,
But love remained a flame within my soul.

What though I watched and fasted and did good
Like any saint among my sisterhood,
God could not be deceived, God understood

How night and day my love was as a cry
Calling my lover out of earth and sky
The while I shut the bars against reply.

Years thence a message came: I stood to deal
The lepers' portions through the bars of steel;
A pilgrim thrust me something shut with seal.

I could not know him in his hoodings hid;
Besides, he fled: his package I undid;
Lancelot's leopard-crest was on the lid.

Within, on scarlet ivory, there lay
A withered branchlet, having leaves of grey.
A writing said: "This is an olive spray

Picked for your blessing from a deathless tree
That shades the garden of Gethsemane;
May it give peace, as it has given me."

Did it give peace? Alas, a woman knows
The rind without may deaden under blows;
But who has peace when all within's a rose?

THE DEATH OF LANCELOT

THEN, after many years, a rider came,
An old lame man upon a horse as lame,
Hailing me 'Queen' and calling me by name.

I knew him; he was Bors of Gannis, he.
He said that in his chapel by the sea
My lover on his death-bed longed for mè.

No vows could check me at that dying cry,
I cast my abbess-ship and nunhood by . . .
I prayed, "God, let me see him ere he die."

We passt the walls of Camelot: we passt
Sand-raddled Severn shadowing many a mast,
And bright Caerleon where I saw him last.

Westward we went, till, in an evening, lo,
A bay of bareness with the tide at flow,
And one green headland in the sunset's glow.

There was the chapel, at a brooklet's side.
I galloped downhill to it with my guide.
I was too late, for Lancelot had died.

I had last seen him as a flag in air,
A battle banner bidding men out-dare.
Now he lay dead; old, old, with silver hair.

I had not ever thought of him as old . . .
This hurt me most: his sword-hand could not hold
Even the cross upon the sacking-fold.

They had a garden-close outside the church
With Hector's grave, where robins came to perch.
When I could see again, I went to search

For flowers for him dead, my king of men.
I wandered up the brooklet, up the glen:
A robin watched me and a water-hen.

There I picked honeysuckles, many a bine
Of golden trumpets budding red as wine,
With dark green leaves, each with a yellow spine.

We buried him by Hector, covered close
With these, and elder-flower, and wild rose.
His friends are gone thence now: no other goes.

He once so ringing glad among the spears,
Lies where the rabbit browses with droppt ears
And shy-foot stags come when the moon appears.

Myself shall follow, when it be God's will;
But whatsoe'er my death be, good or ill,
Surely my love will burn within me still.

Death cannot make so great a fire drowse;
What though I broke both nun's and marriage-vows,
April will out, however hard the boughs;

And though my spirit be a lost thing blown,
It, in its waste, and, in the grave, my bone,
Will glimmer still from Love, that will atone.

DUST TO DUST

HENRY PLANTAGENET, the English King,
Came with Fair Rosamond, for monkish picks
Had lifted flaggings set in Roman bricks
And cleared a Latin-carven slab which told
That Arthur and his Queen were buried there . . .

They watched: the diggers raised the covering . . .
There lay those great ones placid under pyx;
Arthur enswathed as by a burning wing
Or wave of Gwenivere's undying hair,
Which lit the vaulty darkness with its gold.

Seeing such peace the living lovers knelt
And sought each other's hands: those dead ones lay
Untouched by any semblance of decay,
Liker to things immortal than things dead,
Manhood's undying glory, beauty's queen.

The crimson rose in Rosamunda's belt
Dropped, on the dead, one petal, soft as may.
Like ice that unseen April makes to melt,
Those bodies ceast, as though they had not been;
The petal lay on powder within lead.

ON THE COMING OF ARTHUR

By ways unknown, unseen,
The summer makes things green,
The pastures and the boughs
Wherein birds house.

Summer will come again,
For sick things become sane,
And dead things fat the root
That brings forth fruit.

Arthur, like summer, waits,
For Wit and Will are gates,
Like those the summers pass
To green earth's grass.

Arthur will come like June,
Full meadow and full moon,
With roses up above
As red as love,

And may-bloom down below,
As white as fallen snow,
And no least linnet dumb,
O Arthur, come.

THE OLD TALE OF THE BEGETTING

The men of old, who made the tale for us,
Declare that Uther begat Arthur thus:—

Queen Ygrain sat in her bower
Looking from Tintagel tower.

Uther saw Ygrain the Bright,
His heart went pit-pat at the sight.

He said to Merlin, "Make her mine,
Or you'll be hog's meat for my swine."

Merlin wrought all day with pray'r,
With water, earth and fire and air.

He made a mask that had the look,
Colour and speech of Ygrain's Duke.

Uther wore it and came late
And knocked upon Tintagel gate.

He cried, with the mask's voice, "Fair Ygrain,
Open, it is your lord again."

The dogs howled and the owls cried,
But Uther came to the Queen's side.

As he climbed to the Queen's bed,
Ygrain's Duke on the moors fell dead.

Uther drinks and boasts at his board,
Ygrain sings for her dead lord:
"Would I were pierced through with a sword!"

THE TAKING OF GWENIVERE

FRENCH poets write:—That, Lancelot the brave
Fought and defeated Arthur's Knights, to save
Queen Gwenivere, then sentenced to the fire:—

That he and she then lived in heart's desire
At Joyous Gard, for certain months or years.

This is Queen Isolt's tale, not Gwenivere's,
Tristan's, not Lancelot's: but since men know
This version best, I tell it also so.

Soon as the colour-giving dawn was seen,
Arthur bade call
His Court, to judge the sinning of his Queen
There in the hall.
Himself, in scarlet, sat upon his throne
To hear her plead;
She, with her beauty only, stood alone;
Alone indeed.

For round her stood the widows and the young
Of all the Knights
Whose limbs and lives her lover had unstrung
On the wall's heights;

And with them were the rabble of the Court
And Modred's friends,
Thinking the baiting of the Queen a sport
That made amends.

And in the shrilling of the threats and cries
That nothing stilled,
Sir Modred told of Lancelot's emprise
And how he killed
The meyny sent against him to discover
The wicked thing.
"He killed them," Modred cried, "this woman's lover.
Be just, O King."

Then Arthur spoke: "You bid me to be just . . .
Justice decrees
Death for the petty treason of a lust
And brooks no pleas;
'Death for the wife by burning at the stake;'
The law is clear;
No shadow of exception will I make,
It is death here

Unless the one accused can bring defence
Of such a kind
That we be certain of her innocence . . .
Now let us find
What answer the accused, Queen Gwenivere,
Makes to the tale
Of petty treason brought against her here.
Let truth prevail."

The red-gold Queen replied: "O tender lord
To grant this grace,
To let me answer as you sit at board
To try the case.
A few short hours ago you ordered men
To take and kill
My friend and me. Since murder throve not then,
Now justice will."

"No," Arthur said, "they were not sent to slay,
But to arrest
And bring to me: they charged you to obey
The King's behest.
Resistance to my order was the cause
Of twelve men's death;
For that there shall be answer to the laws
As the law saith.

But the main question now is treason, Queen.
This Knight and you
Met to be lovers as you long have been.
Is that not true?
You went disguised, in darkness and alone,
To this man's lair,
Because you are his woman to the bone
And loved him there.

If not to love this captain, tell us then
Why did you go
To meet him, hidden from the eyes of men
In darkness so?

Answer us that . . . remember that you stand
On a pit's brink.
Speak truth as one in judgment on God's hand,
But ere speech . . . think."

The colour came to Gwenivere's pale cheek,
Her great eyes shone:
"Why should I think," she asked, "before I speak?
All thought is gone
From you and all the rabble kennelled here
To hear me cast . . .
You mean to burn me living on a bier
By sentence past.

I say you lie. Your killers never spoke
Of the King's will,
But beat the turret door until it broke,
Meaning to kill.
Then Lancelot to save me (me, the Queen)
From the King's friends,
Made such a story as will last, I ween,
Till the world ends.

There were thirteen against a man and me;
These two remain:
Modred and Mullet in their infamy,
The things unslain . . .
They disobeyed your orders without cause,
They mocked your will:
No matter: they may much assist your laws
To kill me still."

"Queen," Arthur answered, "if they disobeyed,
That cannot clear
You, the accused one, of the charges made
Against you here.
The chief of which is, that unlawful love
Sways you from me,
And has done long, as many people prove
To certainty.

What the Court asks from you is a defence.
That you must make,
Or our unchanging law will send you hence
To burn at stake.
Why did you go by night to Lancelot
If not for sin?
Let royal indignation be forgot,
Let truth begin."

Then the proud red-gold lady, beauty's peer,
Answered: "Proceed . . .
Burn me, to soothe this kennel barking here,
Your friends in need,
Your haters and your killers and your two
Flee-ers, who ran.
Know, there is warrantise for all you do:
I loved this man."

Then Arthur said: "No need to question more . . .
Since you are his,
Doubly a traitor to the oaths you swore,
Your sentence is

That you be burned within the public ring
Outside the wall,
Before this noon: thus sentences the King . . .
Bear witness all."

Then Gawaine said: "King Arthur, you are mad,
And act from spite . . .
This is no trial that the Queen has had . . .
You have no right
To sentence on confession, without proof,
As the world knows."
Then Arthur said: "Peace, Gawaine, stand aloof.
To stake she goes."

Then Gawaine said: "You turn all upside down
For one hour's rage . . .
She is the chiefest sapphire in your crown,
Star of her age:
And you, because your bastard Modred wills,
Cast her to die.
It is not justice, no, but he that kills . . .
That infamy."

Then Arthur said: "You, for this insolence
To me, the King,
Shall call the bodyguard and take her hence
Out to the Ring,
And there see sentence done as I command."
Gawaine said: "No.
Let Modred be your foul act's dirty hand,
I will not go.

No; let your bastard do your hangman's task;
I, a King's son,
Refuse it, whether you command or ask."
Then everyone
Cried: "Down with Gawaine!" But Sir Gawaine turned
Scorning them all;
He shouldered through the mob that milled and churned
And left the hall.

Then Arthur cried to Gareth, Gawaine's brother,
Still but a boy:
"You, Gareth, shall not question, like the other,
Your King's employ.
You, on your knightly service, take the Queen,
This proven trash,
And burn her as a felon on the green
To bitter ash.

About it: go: fall in the bodyguard."
At this he rose
And left the Queen sans counsel or regard,
Alone with foes.
The widows and the children of those killed,
And all the mean
With nails that clutcht and savagery that thrilled,
Assailed the Queen,

So that the spearmen had ado to check
The rush that came
With sharp claws stretching for the victim's neck
And shrieks of shame.

But Gareth with a spear-butt beat them back
And kept space free,
Then said to her: "O lovely Queen, alack
That this should be . . .

Now I am shamed whatever thing I do:
Letting you live,
I break my oath; and if I murder you,
None will forgive
And nought atone, forever, till I die . . .
These curs at least
Shall all behave or show a reason why."
Then like a beast,

A bull that sees his foe, or wolves made one,
Seeing their prey,
That crowd of haters brought with malison
The Queen to bay . . .
They beat the spearmen back, they spat, they struck,
They overwhelmed . . .
Gareth was gallant but had little luck,
That lad unhelmed;

So, in an instant, Queen and guard were reeds
Tosst in a flood
Of devils utterly possesst by greeds
For human blood.
They screamed: "You golden harlot, once so proud,
Shall now be tame;
Come to the fire, malkin, in your shroud,
And feed the flame."

Then suddenly, while all the building rang
From those who curst,
The bronze doors were forct open with a clang,
And in there burst
Lancelot and his meyny, with Sir Bors,
Ector and Urre,
Cutting a pathway to her from the doors
To rescue her.

In that fierce mellay of the charge none knew
What foe he hit;
Each in his headlong fury struck and slew,
Steel on steel bit.
Lancelot cleared the crowd, his meyny broke
The King's array;
There Lancelot killed Gareth with a stroke,
And Ector, Kai.

And Bors killed Gauter, and Sir Safer clave
Driant the Bright;
There Bel the Proud was toppled to his grave,
And Tor the Knight.
Lancelot at the Queen's side cleared a ring
And shouted: "Swine . . .
I take this royal lady from the King,
She is now mine.

Tell Arthur therefore that I take her hence . . .
If he demur,
Let him give battle; I will make defence
For love of her."

Then, with his arm about her, forth he stalkt
Out, through the crowd,
Who shrank away from him like jackals baulkt,
Snarling but cowed.

Then at the gateway taking horse, he passt
Usk bridge at trot,
And on the green beyond it trotted fast
From archer's shot.
Th' alarm bell in the tower boomed like surf,
But fear was gone
From all those comrades trotting on the turf
While the sun shone.

Till noon they trotted, then, near Braddoc reach,
They turned aside
From raddled Severn babbling in soft speech,
To a green ride;
Through ancient oakwoods where the ravens built,
All day they went,
Till sunset found them on the western tilt
Of the bare bent.

There, looking back across the misty woods
Topped by red sky,
They saw white Venus star the solitudes
Above the Wye;
They saw the Severn sandy to the mouth,
Arthur's domain,
The forest and the mountains to the south,
Chain in blue chain.

Then Lancelot and Gwenivere were sure
That they were done
With all their past, however long might dure
Their share of sun.
That they were finisht with that realm of gold
As Knight and Queen;
The glory of their living was grown old,
Their joy had been.

Above the rock, above the well, above
The grove of thorn,
That couple stood, those burners in great love,
On the forlorn
Lean neck of hill surmounted by the caer,
The glow of light
Shone in the Captain's eyes and the Queen's hair
Before the night.

They set their tired horses to the east
Over the crest.
Beyond, the colours had already ceast,
Birds were at rest.
The mist was creeping on the Seven Springs
Where no light glowed,
A darkness was upon the face of things:
To that they rode.

SOUTH AND EAST

WHEN good King Arthur ruled these western hursts,
That farmhouse held a farmer with three sons,
Gai, Kai, and Kradoc, so the story runs.
All of the hollow where the water bursts
They reckoned holy land,
For there, they said, the gods came, hand in hand,
At midnight, in full moon, to quench their thirsts.

So by the hollow's western edge they fenc't
With unhewn stone and hawthorn and wild rose,
A little meadow as a holy close
Not to be trodden in by foot uncleanst . . .
And from the harvests rare
Which filled their granaries, they were aware
That the great gods this service recompenst.

Gai was a hunter through the country-side;
Kai was a braggart little prone to truth;
Kradoc was reckoned but a simple youth,
Though kind and good and all his mother's pride.
He loved his mother well;
He loved his mare and dog; but it befell
That sorrow smote him young, for all three died.

Now it befell in grass-time, late in May,
That Gai, the hunter, going out at dawn,
Found the grass trampled in that sacred lawn,
All trodden as by feet the flowers lay.
He thought, "Some godless men
Have done this evil; lest they come agen
I'll watch to-night beside the holy hay."

Yet in his watch he slept, and when the east
Grew bright with primrose-coloured morning, lo,
The grass again was laid past power to mow;
By godless men, it seemed, not any beast.
So, when the next night fell,
Kai came to watch, but slept, not waking well;
At dawn the trodden portion had increast.

Then, on the third night, Kradoc said, "Let me
Be guard to-night;" so, when the dusk was dim,
He took his hunting-spear and stationed him
Beside the close beneath a hawthorn-tree.
The thin moon westered out,
The midnight covered all things with her doubt,
The summer made the world one mystery.

Then, when the hunting owls had ceast to cry,
There came a sound like birds upon the wing,
And shapes within the close were glimmering,
Hushing, and putting glittering raiment by . . .
Then the shapes moved: they seemed
Three women, dancing, but their moving gleamed:
Or were they birds? because they seemed to fly.

"They are the goddesses," he thought, "at game . . .
Soon they will blast me;" but he watcht intent . . .
Starlight and dawn a little colour lent;
They were three women, each like moving flame
In some old dance of glee,
All lovely, but the leader of the three
Beauty so great as hers can have no name.

For hours he stared, not moving, while they danced;
Then in the brightening dusk a blackbird cried;
The dancing stopped, the women slipped aside,
There to the grey wall where their plumage glanced,
They donned it and were gone
Up, upon wings; across the sky they shone,
Gleams on the darkness where the dawn advanced.

And being vanisht, all his heart was sore
With love of that fair Queen. "Alas, I kept
Ill watch," he said, "and all the grass is stepped
As though it had been danct on o'er and o'er.
To-night I'll try again,
A second night I will not watch in vain."
All day at work love searcht him to the core.

At night, his father and his brothers both
Came with him to the holy close to guard;
But long before the midnight many-starred,
His comrades slept, forgetting boast and oath.
The hours went by: he heard
The darkness laughing with the marvellous bird
Who husht the woodland with her plighting troth.

Then, suddenly, with linnet cryings sweet,
The shapes were near him, putting off their wings;
Then all the close was swift with glimmerings
Of silvery figures upon flying feet
White as the thorn that blows,
Skimming the daisies as the swallow goes
Or as the sunlight ripples upon wheat.

Then, as he stared and prayed, the thought came bold.
"There are their wings upon the wall, put by . . .
If I should take them, then they could not fly . . .
But these are gods, immortal from of old,
And they would blast me dead
If I should touch their plumage silver-spread,
Let alone gather it and try to hold."

But as the moth about the candle tries
To know the beauty of the inmost fire,
And feels no burning but his heart's desire,
And even by scorching cannot be made wise,
He took the wings: a lark
Twittered, and colour stood out from the dark;
Those figures sought their wings with passionate cries.

"They are not goddesses," he thought; and then
Seeing who held their wings, those lovely birds
Were pleading with him with caressing words:
"Friend, we shall die if we are seen by men.
Give us our wings, oh, give;
We may not look upon the sun and live:
Sweet mortal, let us have our plumes agen."

Then, to the first, he gave the plumes, from fear;
Then, to the second, gave them out of grace;
Then she, the Queen, was with him, face to face,
Within the touch of hand, she was so near.
The two spread wings and sailed
Up to the summer heaven primrose-paled.
"O lovely Queen," he cried, "for pity, hear.

These two nights now I have beheld your dance,
And nothing matters now, but only you;
You are so beautiful, it shakes me through,
The thought of you is my inheritance.
I am unfit to speak
To such as you, but, lovely Queen, I seek
Only to love you, leaving life to chance.

I am unfit to touch your wings; but quake
At thought of losing you; for pity, tell
How I may reach the Kingdom where you dwell,
There to be slave or servant for your sake;
O bird of beauty bright,
Teach me the way, or come again to-night
And have some pity or my heart will break."

Then looking on the lovely lad's distress,
She loved his love for her and pitied him;
But now the morning made the stars all dim;
She took the wings from his unhappiness.
She said, "We have been seen,
We cannot dance again upon this green,
And where I dwell is past the wilderness."

"O tell me where," he cried, "for I shall find
The way there." "Ah," she answered, "Way is none.
We dwell South of the Earth, East of the Sun,
Beyond the savage rocks and seas unkind;
You have no wings for flight,
No earthly mortal knows the course aright,
Unless the Three Queens have it still in mind."

"And where are they?" he asked. "Far, far," she said,
"Somewhere beyond the sunset in the West;
In seeking me you choose a weary quest.
Now, friend, farewell." "One minute more," he prayed:
"Beloved, I shall try. . . .
For I shall love you only till I die . . .
And seeking you, I shall not be afraid."

Her glowing face was noble with sweet thought.
"Oh friend," she said, "the love of me will bring
Loneliness, toil and many a bitter thing;
Nor can the friend you strive to help in aught.
But I will wait you there . . .
Come, even with palsied limbs and snowy hair,
All things are truly found if truly sought."

Then, leaning suddenly, she kisst his lips,
And pressed one glittering feather in his hand,
And swept away above the wakening land
As the white owl at dusk from cover slips . . .
Up the dark wood her gleam
Shone, as adown a basalt shines a stream;
Then she was gone and joy was in eclipse.

At first, he hoped that she would come again:
He watched the next night through: no dancers shone;
Then the next night, until the stars were gone;
Then the third night, but vigil was in vain.
"She cannot come," he cried,
"I will go seek her Kingdom far and wide;
Better to die in search than live in pain."

So at the downland market he enquired
Of all the tinkers, if they knew the way
South of the Earth? "There's no such land," said they;
"We have gone roving Earth till we are tired
And never heard the name."
The wandering merchants told the lad the same:
They knew all lands, but not the one desired.

And in the inn, a travelling minstrel told
Of lands beyond the sea, both East and West,
Lands where the phoenix has her burning nest,
And trees have emerald leaves and fruits of gold,
But no land East the Sun . . .
"Boy, I have been," he said, "There is not one."
"None," Kradoc thought, "There must be, to the bold."

He bade farewell to father, brothers, home,
Friends, and the grasses that her feet had prest;
He sailed to find the Three Queens in the West,
O'er many a billow with a toppling comb,
Till, 'neath the western star,
He trod the forest where the were-wolves are
And spied a hut, as of some witch or gnome.

There sat an old crone wrinkled nose to chin.
"Lady," he said, "Since I have gone astray,
Seeking the queens to tell me of my way,
Have you some shed that I can rest me in?
In recompense, I'll cut
Your winter's firing and repair your hut."
"O wonderful," she said, "New times begin.

I have reigned here for twenty oak-tree lives,
Yet never once has stranger spoken thus,
Bowing, uncovered, thoughtful, courteous:
What marvellous young noble here arrives?
One who goes South the Earth?
I govern all four-footed beasts from birth,
To-morrow I will ask them and their wives,

If any know the way to that far land.
Rest here to-night." And when the morrow came
All the four-footed creatures, wild and tame,
Ran thither at the lifting of her hand:
Slink tigers yellow-eyed,
The horse, the stag, the rabbit and his bride,
Fur, antlers, horns, as many as the sand.

They listened while she questioned of the way:
"South of the Earth?" they answered, "Madam, no . . .
It is a country where we never go . . .
There is not such a land, the bisons say.
Ask of the birds who fly;
The eagle may have seen it from the sky,
If not the eagle, then the seagull may."

"So," the Queen said, "My people cannot tell.
You must away to ask my Sister Queen
To ask her subject birds if they have seen
A country South the Earth where people dwell.
A year hence, travelling hard,
You may be with her, if no ills retard.
Good luck attend. Commend me to her well."

After a twelvemonths' tramp he reacht a lake
Wide-shimmering, beyond a waste of reeds;
There by a hovel mouldered green with weeds,
An old hag mumbled, gap-tootht as a rake.
"Lady," he pled, "I pray
You grant me shelter, I have lost my way;
All such requital as I can I'll make.

I will re-thatch your house and cut your corn,
And gather in your apples from the tree."
"O wonderful; new times begin," said she.
"I have lived here since roses had a thorn,
Yet never once till now
Has courteous youth addressed me with a bow.
And you go East the Sun and are forlorn?

I govern all the birds that know the air;
Rest here to-night; to-morrow I will ask
If any of them all can help your task
Or know the ways by which men journey there."
When morning came, she cried
"Come hither, birds," and from the heavens wide
Came erne and geier, heron, finch and stare,

Jay, robin, blackbird, sparrow, croaking crow,
Hawks from the height their talons brown with blood,
Gannets that snatch the herring from the flood,
And fiery birds that glitter as they go.
"East of the Sun?" they said. . . .
"We have flown windy space since wings were made . . .
There's no such land. Perhaps the fish may know."

"So," the Queen said, "My subjects cannot guide.
You must go ask my Sister Queen, who rules
The dwellers in the rivers and the pools
And the green seas that waver yet abide.
A year's hard travelling hence
Should bring you there: her Kingdom is immense,
Her folk know every country washt by tide."

After another year he trod the beach
Beside an ocean breaking wave by wave.
There an old hag peered from a dripping cave.
"O ocean Queen," he cried, "grant, I beseech,
That I may rest till day.
To-morrow I will labour to repay
Your kindness to me as your wish shall teach."

"O wonderful; new times begin," she said.
"I have lived here since raindrops became sea;
Yet none till now has spoken thus to me,
Courteous and kind and modest as a maid.
South of the Earth you go?
Rest for to-night; to-morrow you shall know
If those I govern know it and can aid."

When morning came, the Queen gave her command,
And straight the bay was white with many a streak
From the swift fins of those that cannot speak:
Whales, dolphins, salmon, hurrying to the land;
Herrings, the pickerels fierce,
Mackerel with blue flanks writ with magic verse,
And cuttles such as eye has never scanned.

The thought passed to and fro, without a word.
"Ah," the Queen said, "They cannot help you, friend.
Between the world's edge and the ocean's end
No fish, no four-foot beast, no flying bird
Has heard of any place
South of the Earth: you say the human race
Knows no such land. Your seeking is absurd.

Why not abandon what is surely vain?
Why not return to all you left at home,
To shear the shining furrow down the loam
Feeling the plough-team lean against the rein?
To marry; and be skilled
In all good crafts, and have your granaries filled
And live till Death comes gently without pain?

Were these not better than the life you choose,
Seeking the thing that is not?" "No," said he;
"This feather, that still shines, she gave to me;
I will go on, though every footstep bruise."
Out in the bay a stir
Broke the land's quiet image into blur . . .
"Wait yet," the Queen said, "something comes with news.

Yes, news of South the Earth . . . the fish that flies,
The thing that beasts and birds and fish disown;
He has a rumour of it, he alone . . .
Go with him therefore, if you think it wise.
These silver wings and fins
Will help you thither; and Desire wins
Though the Desired, won, may prove no prize."

Then with that silvery skimmer of the seas
He sped across the unquiet fatal field,
Now pastured on by haze, now ridged and steeled,
Now low, now loud, but never at its ease;
Till a last leaping flight
Bore him ashore through billows crashing white
Beneath a cliff of granite topped by trees.

And at the scree-top, lo, the crag was sheer,
Hard granite face, nine hundred feet and more,
Gleaming where drifts of cataracts came o'er
And trackless to the foot of mountaineer.
He traced along beneath,
Among the boulders and the stunted heath,
And ever and anon he seemed to hear

From somewhere up above, the cry and bay
Of dogs and hounds together giving tongue,
So that his spirit was with terror wrung
Lest these should be the hunting dogs who slay
Like wolves, what men they meet;
He was defenceless and without retreat,
But thought "Since hounds are there, there is a way

Up to the summit; and perhaps the hounds
Have huntsmen with them who would succour me."
So thrice he hailed, all unavailingly.
Then o'er the tumbled rocks with leaps and bounds
A dog came swiftly to him,
Barking and wagging tail as though he knew him.
It was his dog, long dead to smells and sounds,

Long buried in that distant Berkshire place,
Now here alive, and crying, "Master, come,
This is our ever-living happy home . . .
Come with me up the track the rabbits trace;
This way, and have no fear.
Climb with me to the forest, Master dear.
We live there always in delightful chase.

All day we hunt whatever game we choose,
Then, in the dusk, we pull it down and eat;
But by the dawn it runs again on feet,
Alive and scattering scent across the dews . . .
Now, up the rock top; lo,
The forest, green as Berkshire long ago.
There run the hounds at game they cannot lose."

And, as he spoke, the precipice was scaled.
There lay a marvellous land of oak-trees high,
With grass where hounds were running in full cry
After immortal game that never failed.
All dogs of every kind
Routed or hunted as they had the mind,
And all were glad, for all were waggy-tailed.

"Come with me, Master, through the forest green,"
The little dog said, "as we went of old
Along the Icknield underneath the wold.
Here we forget, in time, what we have been;
But I remember well
The rabbits and the moles and the rich smell
Of those old warrens in that happy scene,

And mind your kindness to me." Then they went
For three long days across the forest land,
Until they reacht a desert, white with sand.
"Stay here," the dog said. "Someone will be sent
To guide you further on."
He licked his hand and bounded and was gone.
The desert stretcht its desolate extent.

Its saltness nourisht naught but poisonous things,
The moon in silence looked upon its waste,
Then, towards dawn, a something came in haste
Trotting the sand or skimming it on wings:
It was his long-dead mare,
Coming with whinnyings to greet him there,
Dreading no adder's bite nor scorpion stings.

"Master," she said, "I come out of my rest
To bear you hence upon my wings of flame,
For I can fly now, nothing makes me lame . . .
Mount me and lay both hands upon my crest.
O I remember well,
Deep in my spirit, all the Berkshire fell
And you and I at gallop, heading west.

Now for a time I rest me from the past,
But those old days recur; the huntsman's horn,
The opening of the bin-lid for the corn,
The sweet red apples tumbling to the blast.
You with the bit, which I
Dodged, till the oat-sieve shook too temptingly . . .
And all your kindness to me to the last.

Now mount and ride, together we will go
A swifter gallop than we ever knew."
Then, when he mounted, instantly she flew
Over the desert white with salt like snow;
Skimming the sudden whip
Of the blunt adder with the swollen lip;
Making the sage flow back as waters flow.

Till after three long days she made a halt
Upon the beaches of a sea whose waves
Moaned like to cattle in the glittering caves
And fed the tremulous jellies with their salt.
"O Master mine, farewell,"
The mare said, "Now I gallop back to dwell
In far green pastures without any fault.

For there we dwell together in the plain
Unbitted and unshod, in knee-deep grass,
Where never any gad nor botfly was,
But scarlet apples fall and golden grain.
And there we whinny and race
With streaming tails in the delight of pace,
And muse about old harness with disdain."

So with a whinny as of old she sped,
Out of his sight across the desert sand,
Leaving him lonely on the ocean-strand
Where the spent tide its gathered seaweed spread:
Then, gliding over sea,
A woman came to him; no wings had she,
She moved by love, being his Mother dead.

"O lovely son," she said, "who have given all
For love, despite the hardness of the way,
I come to give such guidance as I may,
And be beside your going, lest you fall.
O often I have been
Close, as you travelled hither, though unseen,
And speaking, though you could not hear my call.

I live in the sweet world that love creates.
It is more beautiful than I can tell,
For we can go with water into hell,
With peace to pain, with gentleness to hates.
We have this joy, to strive
To help the grief of every thing alive
And show where Heaven shines at open gates.

And some, if truly called by mortal need,
Can come, with light and courage and swift strength,
To vanquish the dull snake whose deadly length
Laps and would coil, round every human deed.
Give me your hand, my son,
The darkness shows that morning has begun,
And we have far to travel: let us speed."

She took his hand, and, lo, they footed sure,
Unsunk upon the unsupporting sea;
They trod the air, unfallen, flying free,
High in the cloudless currents, mountain-pure,
Until a land arose,
Peak upon peak, with pinnacles of snows,
East of the Sun, where happy dreams endure.

His mother kissed his brow and then was gone;
He was alone upon the shore, his sight
Dazzled at first by plenitude of light,
For all things in that happy country shone.
A loitering cataract leapt . . .
A glittering people, crying "Welcome", swept
On wings above him, flying on and on.

"This is the land," he cried. "But where is she?
Where shall I find the wonder whom I love?"
Before him ran a brook out of a grove,
Bringing clear water to the clearer sea.
Within the green grove dim
Someone was singing at a morning hymn:
"O you," he cried, "Beloved, answer me."

He thrust aside the myrtle and the rose:
There was his lover stitching, plume by plume,
Bright silver wings that glittered in the gloom,
And singing out her ballad to the close . . .
Seeing him there, she stood;
She shone as though the light were in her blood;
Gone was the waiting time with all its woes.

"I never ceased to trust," she said, "And lo,
The wings which I have wrought for you are made,
Save for one silver feather which I laid
Bright in your hand, beloved, long ago.
You have it still, I see.
We win the lovers' heaven, happy we,
The greatest happiness that heart can know."

Then placing on his shoulders the bright pair
Of wings, she took her lover by the hand
And with him swept above that sunny land,
Thrusting aside, like swans, the rushing air,
To some green place of peace
Where love like theirs forever knows increase,
For nothing sad can ever trouble there.

But sometimes, ere the cuckoos lose their tune,
Ere pink has tinged the snowdrifts of the may
Or seething scythe has gleamed into the hay,
Or nightingales stopped singing to the moon
Whose whiteness climbs and rounds;
Then, in the peace which silences earth's sounds
Save the bird's triumph and the water's croon,

Then, sometimes, in the hush, a glimmering glows
Into a brightness in that Berkshire grass.
Those lovers come where their first meeting was
Beside the spring, within the holy close.
They dance there through the night,
Treading adown in patterns of delight
Moon-daisy, vetch, and fallen hawthorn blows.

FULFILMENT

I.

Long since, Sir Constans governed here for Rome,
Then northern pirates beat him from his home;
King Cwichelm was the captain of the horde:
He made Sir Constans fly
Into the western wastes, a broken lord.
Cwichelm succeeded to his monarchy;
His wasps made merry in the honeycomb;
He made this Britain England with the sword.

II.

Yet, being valiant, Constans often tried
To oust King Cwichelm from the country-side,
By night-alarms and raids against his power:
All failed, King Cwichelm throve . . .
Driving him back until he had to cower
Within his moated manor in a grove
Of old dark elms, abated of his pride,
And Cwichelm's star rose higher, hour by hour.

III.

Save that, although he was a conquering King,
He was forever troubled by this thing,

That still he had no heir who should succeed
To what his hands had won.
In all his glory, this was grief indeed,
To win a Kingdom yet to have no son,
To rule the Kingdom after him and bring
Constans to death and make the rebels bleed.

IV.

Yet still, though sonless, he had won a crown,
He and his pirates, dwellers in no town,
Sea-harriers, who harried half the year,
Had made a Kingdom his . . .
Ploughland whose corn had eighty grains an ear,
Sweet-fruited orchards growing all that is,
Green valley-grasses rich, sheep-pasturing down,
"A son," he thought, "would make me without peer."

V.

After long years his barren wife conceived,
And he, in hope that all might be retrieved,
Yet harassed by the doubt that she might die,
Rode out, with horse and hound,
And viewed a stag away and went full cry
West over fell beyond his Kingdom's bound,
Till in the savage forest, sombre-leaved,
He found himself alone, with no friend by.

VI.

He was alone and lost in the wild woods,
Past cry of hound or horn, in solitudes

Where Constans' rebels rested from their raids,
His horse too blown to stir.
Mist that was drizzle blotted out the glades,
The darkness moaned like tempest among fir,
Then the south-easter gathered all her broods
Of rainstreaks driven and chill that cut like blades.

VII.

Leaving his horse, King Cwichelm trod the mire
Backed to the storm which seemed never to tire
But roared in tumult, stabbing as it went.
The rain flung from the trees
Followed like steps of men with fell intent.
King Cwichelm struggled on in little ease
Till in the dark he spied a light or fire
Gleam in a streak as from a shutter's rent.

VIII.

And thrusting thither through the wood, he found
A manor without guard or spear or hound,
A black house among elms that the storm smote.
King Cwichelm knocked until
A man unbarred the door and peered to note
What midnight stranger stood upon the sill.
"Cwichelm," he said, "forwandered and half drowned.
Enter. O King, I shall not cut your throat,

IX.

Though I am Constans, whom you dispossest.
Come in to supper and to bed and rest,

Take them yourself, I cannot help you, I,
For even now upstairs
My wife is giving birth and like to die."
Thus saying, Constans turned him to his cares
And Cwichelm entered as his foeman's guest,
And ate and drank and warmed him and was dry;

X.

Then, being weary, turned him to his bed,
But slept uneasily, for in his head
Voices of angels clamoured "Take, take, take . . .
A man must take or give . . .
Kill Constans' baby for your Kingdom's sake,
For he will have your Kingdom if he live."
Then others cried "O Cwichelm, give him bread,
"Give . . . give your crown." Then Cwichelm was awake.

XI.

But starting up, he found it only a dream.
The storm in its hurry made the chimneys scream,
The tossing elm-boughs hissed like sea on shingle;
He lapsed and slept again.
Then trumpets blowing made his spirit tingle,
A clear voice cried "Unless the child be slain,
Constans will beat you, he will be supreme.
Unless you kill the boy, your bloods will mingle."

XII.

Rousing at this, he started, but once more
Found it a dream, though clearer than before,

And once again he turned him to his sleep;
And in his dream a form
Whirled to him with bright fire-wings asweep,
And spoke above the tumult of the storm,
"Give, give, King Cwichelm, give the babe good store,
Give even your heart's blood, if you wish to keep."

XIII.

And starting up, lo, Constans at his side
Crying "Alas, alas, my wife has died
During this dawn, in bearing of a son;
And now I have no mate.
But rise, King Cwichelm, for the storm is done,
My men have come with horses to the gate,
Eat and begone, my ranger will be guide,
Go to your happy home, from him with none."

XIV.

Then Cwichelm, trembling from his visions still,
Bade Constans bow to what was Heaven's will;
But added, "In return for all you gave
Most nobly in my need,
Grant me this privilege, that I may have
Your new-born son, to rear like my own seed."
"Take him," said Constans, "for I saw him kill
My darling wife, for whom they dig the grave."

XV.

Then with a shaking voice he bade the nurse
Give up the child whose coming brought such curse;

And she, poor woman, loath to see him sent
Into the winter cold,
Took Constans' gold-embroidered cloak, and rent
Half of its blue away, and warmly rolled
The babe therein, small penny in much purse;
Poor penny hardly won to be so spent.

XVI.

So Cwichelm took the child, Sir Constans' heir;
And Constans, bowed by sorrows to despair,
Buried his wife and rode into the west.
Meanwhile as Cwichelm rode
Bearing the tender infant from its nest,
He met his men with news from his abode;
His Queen had borne a little girl most fair,
During the gale, while he was Constans' guest.

XVII.

Among the men was Hrut, his marshal grim;
King Cwichelm went aside and spoke with him
And bade him take the child into the wood,
To some dark thicket deep;
"Kill it and give it to the wolves for food,
This brat that Constans offered me to keep.
Go, hack the little bastard limb from limb."
"Right," said the marshal, "I will kill him. Good."

XVIII.

Yet being within the yew-grove with his prey,
Having his knife bare with intent to slay,

The baby smiled and put him from his deed:
He laid him down in fear.
"Lie there," he said, "God help you in your need.
May the wolf suckle you or the she-deer."
Then mounting horse he galloped fast away
And told the King, "I have ended Constans' breed."

XIX.

Thereafter Cwichelm prospered, yet no son
Was born to follow when his rule was done,
But still his daughter grew like beauty's rose.
And sometimes Cwichelm mused:
"That night at Constans' house, what forms were those
That trumpeted and ordered and accused?
Dreams of the night, not real beings, none."
And Time moved by, that harvests men and sows.

XX.

Then Constans, being old, asked leave to come
To end his life beside his ancient home,
And Cwichelm, seeing him friendless, gave him place
As steward in his court.
There where he once had governed, he was base,
An old sea-battered ship come home to port;
A shadow by the fire with fingers numb
And the beauty that defeat gives in his face.

XXI.

It fell that Cwichelm rode his northern leet
To watch his stallion running in a heat;

And in the finish, at the post, a lad
Riding a chestnut mare
Came like a thunderbolt with all he had
And beat the stallion by a short head, bare;
A boy like Constans, like as grains of wheat.
King Cwichelm eyed him strangely and was sad.

XXII.

Then, questioning about him, he was told
That this same boy, now twenty winters old,
Was found, when newly-born, beneath a yew
Where Constans' son was laid,
Wrapt in a strip of gold-embroidered blue
Like that with which great nobles were arrayed.
"He is Constans' lamb, crept back into the fold,"
Thought Cwichelm. "Hrut has lied; he never slew.

XXIII.

Hrut lied and spared him: natheless I shall kill."
He called the lad and praised his riding skill
And offered him employ, to come and go
With messages of state
From court to country, riding to and fro.
This the lad gladly took. Then fear and hate
Wrought upon Cwichelm, till he bent his will
To strike that gallant lad and lay him low.

XXIV.

So, writing straightway to Earl Hrut, he said:
"You have both broken oath and disobeyed.

You did not kill the baby as you swore.
Being grown to man, he bears
This letter to you, bidding you, once more,
At your head's peril, kill him unawares,
Kill him at once." The boy no longer stayed,
But took the script, not knowing what it bore.

XXV.

Gladly he galloped through the forest pass,
His horse's hurry kicking up the grass,
Till sunset came and all the trees stood still
Black against scarlet sky.
A planet shone: the wood began to thrill
With footsteps and with terror and with cry;
Then midnight tolled another day that was:
He beat the gate at Cwichelm's threshold sill.

XXVI.

It was Sir Constans' self who turned the key.
"Earl Hrut, the marshal, is abed," said he;
"See him to-morrow; come within to rest."
He led him to the fire
And brought him food and wine and watched his guest,
This lad most worthy of a Queen's desire.
"He is like my wife in face," he thought. "Let be . . .
No thought of one so beautiful is best."

XXVII.

"What are you, lad?" he asked. "A foundling, I.
Found in the western forest, like to die,

A new-born babe, wrapt in a strip of blue.
No more of me is known,
Save that the cloth, gold-broidered, bore a clue:—
The snakes King Constans bore upon his throne."
Then Constans thought, "The living God on high
Has given me back the child she never knew."

XXVIII.

And in his heart the misery smote him sore
That he had given the little son she bore
There in such pain, at such a price, to one
Who left him in the hour
To die i' the forest where the wild wolves run.
He hurried to his coffer in the tower;
There lay the strip of blue the midwife tore.
"Such is the cloth that wrapt me," said his son.

XXIX.

Then Constans, deeply moved, withdrew to weep;
The lad curled up upon the bench to sleep
Beside the fire within King Cwichelm's hall;
Hour by hour passt:
Then Constans thought "What weighty matters fall
That Cwichelm sends this messenger so fast?"
The midnight held the castle buried deep,
The lad slept on his bench like dean in stall.

XXX.

And gazing at the lad, he saw the script
Sealed by King Cwichelm, from the wallet slipt

On to the hearth whose embers eased the seal.
So Constans took and read.
"O dog, deserving death without appeal,"
He cried, on reading, "Curses on your head!
But those who trip the helpless shall be trippt;
God gives a moment for myself to deal."

XXXI.

Then, giving thanks that he might thwart the plan,
He forged a letter thus: "Most trusted man,
As you expect my favour, I, the King,
Command that, instantly,
You marry the young princeling that shall bring
This, to my daughter, never asking why.
This on your peril:" thus the letter ran.
"Fly, wasp," said he, "for I have drawn the sting."

XXXII.

What more? The lad delivered the forged screed;
The earl believed it to be Cwichelm's deed,
He caused the lad to marry the princess;
That hour it was done.
When Cwichelm came, he found his wickedness
Had linkt his daughter to his foeman's son.
"Men plot and try," he said, "but God gives heed,
And what God brings to be must surely bless."

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